BLIND MAN

AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR THE BLIND INC.

C. 1

BLIND MAN

BLIND MAN

By
REGINALD WRIGHT KAUFFMAN

DUFFIELD & COMPANY
New York — 1927

By the same author:

THE BLOOD OF KINGS

HV2345
K16
COP. 1

Copyright 1927 by Duffield & Company

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I	SOMEBODY'S FATHER	9
II	WHERE?	14
III	THE STRANGE TAVERN	26
IV	"SOMETHING IN THE NIGHT"	38
V	THE PRISON WITHOUT WALLS	54
VI	MAROONED	67
VII	THE ROOF	86
VIII	TORTURE	95
IX	THE CLICK OF A LATCH	102
X	THE STOLEN SON	107
XI	ONE MASK OFF	116
XII	THE BUZZARD WAY	126
XIII	THE BLIND MAN	131
XIV	THE OTHER HEIR	143
XV	INSIDE	156
XVI	IN CODE	163
XVII	"SHOOT!"	176
XVIII	THE DREADFUL NIGHT	183
XIX	"WHO'S NEXT FOR HELL?"	192
XX	THE BOAT ATTACK	206
XXI	IN THE OOZE	218
XXII	THE BLIND MAN'S SECRET	224
XXIII	TREASON	230
XXIV	AT THE WATER'S EDGE	237
XXV	SEBASTIAN VINK	243
XXVI	AT THE THUNDERBOLT'S END	255
XXVII	THE DEATH AT THE BRIDGE	262
XXVIII	PURSUIT	268
XXIX	"THE DEVIL HIMSELF"	276

BLIND MAN

CHAPTER I

SOMEBODY'S FATHER

Consciousness returned with no observable companion save the realization that it had been long absent. It is not always that coming events propel their shadows. Here Horror drew near a-tiptoe, Riddle of the veiled eyes, and Murder with one red finger at her trembling lips: they all were hidden by the wide skirts of this serenity, which told him only that he was alive and that it was good to be so.

He smelled the mixed odour of chloroform and antiseptic: a hospital. He heard the sound of rubber heels and then a pair of American voices. The odour is the same anywhere on earth; in France, in England, in the United States, the pad-pad of the rubber is identical the world over; but the American tongue has characteristics that it loses in a

foreign atmosphere: No. 27 was ignorant of being No. 27, but he assured himself that he was wonderfully in his native land again.

He wanted to open his eyes, and tried to; but his eyelids were still very heavy. He had to lie there as if he were asleep—and soon was glad that he had lain thus.

A soprano voice was saying:

". . . No temperature for a month, so otherwise he's a well man. You ought to see him taking his exercise! Look how pink his cheeks are—and there's not a scratch on him."

Then a birdlike tenor chirped:

"Indeed:

> "'One sand another
> Not more resembles: that sweet lad
> Who died and was Fidele.'

You are familiar with 'Cymbeline,' Nurse?—I am really almost sure of him.—The straight nose.—The blond hair.—Curling.—The firm chin.—Everything except that single detail.—You have no clue at all?"

"Not a thing," declared Soprano. "What did you say your son's name was?"

"John J.—John J. Knight, of course.—And of course with the 'Junior.'" The birdlike twitter faltered. "If only this boy would waken!"

"We can't be sure when he'll wake up. Sometimes he's like this for hours."

"But the periods have been lessening?"

"Yes; only when he *is* awake, of course he doesn't know anything about himself."

"So you said; but *I* should know *him!* It is only that question of the eyes."

"This case's are brown."

"So were Johnnie's. But there are brown eyes and brown eyes. You say our poor young man will never recover his memory—never?"

"The doctors say so."

There came a pause. Then Tenor resumed:

"And he has been in this condition ever since he was found?"

"As far as our information goes; certainly ever since he was admitted here."

"Dear me! So he would not know me? Even if he indeed proved to be my son?"

"You would have to teach him all about himself."

"As if he were a little child?"

"As to places and people, yes. He'll never remember anything that happened before he came here, but he'll soon learn anything you tell him about it. These cases are always open to suggestion, and this one seems quite bright."

"Well, well! The more I look, the more this, I am convinced, is Johnnie. 'Not a resemblance, but a certainty.' After all these years! If he would only open his eyes!"

Number 27's resolve was taken: he opened them.

What he first saw was ordinary enough. He saw some hospital-beds with heads upon their pillows, and, at the foot of his own bed, a short, dark-eyed, pretty nurse.

"Here," said No. 27 to himself, "is Soprano, and she's not so bad."

Then he noted that beside her stood, unmistakably, Tenor. And about him there was nothing ordinary at all.

No. 27's glance ran up a pale trouser-leg; past a black cutaway coat, braided at the edges and buttoned tightly around a neat waist; a white waistcoat, padded shoulders and a pearl-bearing tie. No. 27 took account of a thin, high-collared throat; a dimpled chin, and a tiny rosebud mouth, topped, but quite unconcealed, by a grey moustache that was like an inverted eyebrow, waxed at both ends. He saw a small, round face, pink and cocked on one side and resting in a mass of tightly curled silver hair, as he had once seen pink peaches

rest on enhancing cotton in a Paris boulevard confectioner's window. He was facing what, scarcely so tall as the nurse and far slimmer, might be a poet, or an actor, or a last survival of the genus *dilletante*.

Without further hesitation, this figure extended a pair of arms even proportionately short. The movement recalled that of a Christmas doll and terminated in lemon-coloured gloves with black stripes down the backs of them.

"It is he!" Even in the joy of realization, Tenor employed the subjective pronoun. "My boy, my boy! Johnnie, don't you know your dear father?"

No. 27 knew, suddenly, everything about himself up to the instant of that explosion which, it seemed, had brought him here—and he thoroughly knew that he had never before to-day set eyes upon the little man at his bedside, and that the little man at his bedside had never before set eyes on him.

"Hello, Dad!" said No. 27. "Know you? Why, certainly I do!"

CHAPTER II

WHERE?

No. 27, Shellshock Ward, Camp Dix Hospital, had been torn from the front-line in France to be laid here at home before the Gate of Adventure.

Could he, on his arrival, have spoken, he might have told of frozen nights in the trenches; of burnings days of open battle; of conflict's rush and sweat and slaughter. Instead, the chart above him was inscribed:

Name:	Unknown.
Unit:	Unknown.
Remarks:	Amnesia.
	7,221,895-D.

One of the many bits of wreckage flung into that back-water by the ebb-tide of war, he should now have come, as his nation had and the men around him, to quiet streams of

peace. Of anything else there was no token: the long, white room exhaled rest and regularity; the atmosphere was the atmosphere of the commonplace. Yet nowhere along the Meuse, and nowhere in the Argonne, had No. 27 been broken by so wild a whirlpool as that to which a turgid current was at this moment bearing him.

For here is no narrative of the World War. Here is an account of what happened at the old Cross Keys Tavern in the March of 1919; of the locked room there and the old grave under the tree; of the chase down the river, and who was killed and why—and *who wasn't*. It is a drama that begins without music, but it will shortly introduce the accordion and the spectacle of the Blind Man dancing among the moonbeams on the deserted towpath at Long Level that Friday night four years ago. It is the true history of the Keppel Case.

There had been a noise as if all the earth and sky were blown open, and a light as if the sun dropped and split wide across No. 27's head: those were the last things that he knew in France. The next thing that he knew was that he was in America and that Tenor and Soprano were discussing him at his bedside.

"Hello, Dad! Know you? Why, certainly I do!"

That was what he was saying. What he was thinking was:

"It's a nut, but harmless."

For, in the Army, a young man learns to think quickly, if not comprehensively. No. 27 knew that his proper person must long since have been reported dead; that his parents had had no relatives on this side of Bellinzona, on Lago Maggiore, and that his name was not John J. Knight, Jr., but Tony Tortona.

He thought, therefore, about his father, killed in that rock-slide at Lichtey's Quarries, fifteen years ago. He thought about his mother and decided that she, having heard of his demise months since, would be comfortable upon his savings from the news-stand that had paid his way through Madison-and-Adams College. When he thought of her, he thought of his home-town, and wished that he were there. But as soon as he thought much of home, he thought more of Lottie—and Lottie made up his mind.

Tony considered himself a reasonable lad. A reasonable lad does not volunteer for a dangerous calling in order to escape the smothering attentions of a young lady and

then, when that service terminates, weakly surrender to her by refusing to play, elsewhere, the welcome son to a doting father.

This reasonable lad scandalously accepted the apparently meagre hazard. He opened his eyes—and when he raised their lids, he raised also the lid of a Pandora-box that dispatched difficulties, dangers and distresses to a score of distant homes, drove men and women of whose existence he was yet ignorant to a cliff-edge of destruction of which he did not dream, sent horses galloping along roads unknown to him and boats scurrying through unknown rapids, instigated murder and turned the feet of still far-off beings into the path of death.

"It's a nut; but harmless."

A breath later, if only for that breath, he was by no means sure of this surmise. The Little Man bent toward him quickly, thrusting his fluffy grey head close to Tony's blond one. There was a queer light in the stranger's eyes. Tony wondered if he had been too familiar with his parent.

"I thought you said he knew nothing!"

The exclamation, really a question, was intended for the nurse; but she, at the note of recognition, had noiselessly hurried to bear to the nearest physician word of this miracu-

lous recovery. Immediately, and without removing his intent gaze from Tony, the Little Man became aware of her absence. He addressed himself directly to the patient.

"I thought you didn't know anything," he whispered: he appeared to be afraid of disturbing the other patients, or of driving Tony's timid memory back to its recent shelter. His breath fanned the young man's downy cheek, and it was hot.

Wasn't the little chap mad, after all? Was it he, Anthony Tortona, that was crazy? Hadn't he awakened? Was all this a part of some shell-shock delusion? Or had the dapper visitor really lost a son, and lost his reason in consequence?

"Where are you going to take me?" Tony procrastinated.

"Home," said the Little Man.

Well, Tony felt that he was in for it now; if Lottie were only far enough on the outside, nothing would matter.

"Where's home?"

The Little Man had not withdrawn his head. "If you remember me——"

"That's the funny part of it," broke in Tony; he knew that it was frequently well to explain madmen to themselves by lending

some plausible colour to their folly. "I remember *you*—I seemed to begin to remember while I heard you talking about me to the nurse—— But I don't remember anything else."

"You are sure?" asked the Little Man.

"Why, one of the fellows in our outfit was shocked like that once; he'd remember what you'd tell him and not another thing."

"Sure about yourself? Quite?" Tony noticed now what accounted for a certain breaking of the visitor's speech: he had a habit of sucking in his breath after even partial stops; it whistled through his rosebud lips.

"Sure I'm sure."

At that the Little Man drew off. He rose to what height he possessed and took a brief turn down the aisle. He clasped his gloved hands behind him, and, when his back was presented, Tony could see the fingers twisting in and out among one another.

Presently his dominant mood returned. He wheeled; his lips puckered in a silent whistle; he almost skipped to the bedside.

"Can you swim?"

Tony breathed relief: no sane man would put such a query at such a time.

"Not that I know of," said Tony. It was

pleasant to tell something that was true. "But *you* ought to remember, Dad."

"I thought perhaps you had learned. They teach all manner of things. To soldiers." He was entirely his former self now. "Your condition—your lost memory: I am unmanned by these." He threw out one short arm:

"'O wilt thou darkling leave me? Do not so.'"

"Not if I know a little more," said Tony. "Only don't you think you'd better tell me before that nurse gets back? Hospital people are so suspicious."

"You are Johnnie Knight," said the Little Man slowly. "John J. Knight, Jr.——"

"I know all that. The way I've been telling you, I got it as soon as I heard you talking to the nurse."

"You won't forget?"

"I'll say I won't!"

The Little Man's smile broadened: it became the mysterious smile that a father gives the child who wants to see his birthday-presents before the birthday's dawn:

"Then the rest will keep. Softly! The nurse returns. . . ."

When it proved able to hurry the unwinding of Army red tape, the Little Man's persuasive power impressed Tony. The end of the week found him and his acquired father bound for that home of which the latter, sufficiently explicit with the authorities, had evaded giving his proclaimed son any information save that it was in Chicago—and bound for it not, as Tony's desire to keep clear of his native Pennsylvania bade him hope, by way of New York, but straight through Philadelphia.

The hospital doctors had issued a warning against unnecessary excitement, and this the Little Man heeded affectionately. He had a Pullman drawing-room ready for his charge at Broad Street Station; when Tony inquired why there were no berths in it, his sole reply was a smile, a wagging of the fluffy head and a not very apposite Shakespearian quotation. He was so benevolently cryptic, and so careful against annoying intrusion, that he opened the door a scant six inches when a knock startled him into the surrender of his tickets. His original remarks were confined to directing Tony's attention toward the beauties of the scenery.

The winter should have been over, but it had brought to its last days a fall of snow, and the country through which they passed appeared well-nigh empty. The sky was a pale green, the scattered farmhouses were lifeless, the faces of the men working along the road red from the nip of the frost. Tony jerked his frank countenance away from the window when the train, after a two hours' ride, rolled into the dark Doncaster station, and yet he could hardly keep his starved eyes from the glass. He knew that he would be terrorized as long as he was in Pennsylvania, and then he remembered that Pittsburgh was close to the Ohio line.

"What time do we get to Pittsburgh?" he inquired of his companion.

"We are not going to Pittsburgh."

The train was pulling out of Doncaster. Tony tried to shuffle from the shoulders of his soul their heavy pack of discipline's blind obedience.

"Then where *are* we going?"

"Not at once to Chicago. There has been some servant trouble at our country place. I shall stop off to attend to it."

"Where?"

With fingers banded by dull, Oriental rings,

the Little Man patted his distressed forehead. His fingers were white and slim, but they gave Tony the impression of an incongruous strength.

"I constantly forget your misfortune, my poor boy. Our country place! Long Level, of course."

"And that's——"

"On the old canal. In York County."

Then it could not be forty miles from Lottie! Tony collapsed into his corner.

But worse was to come:

"We shall have to walk. Several miles," the Little Man pursued. "So sorry. The road is in a shocking condition." He regarded regretfully the white spats upon his tiny feet. "But we shall be well welcomed when we arrive. Fancy how overjoyed your mother will be. To greet you."

"My——" The word, too torn by Tony's horror, expired as he tried to repeat it.

So that miserable John J. Knight, Jr., had a mother, and this crazy John J., Sr., a wife! How could anybody have guessed that there lived a woman who would remain married into such a family? It had been bad enough to contemplate the still possible reappearance

of the genuine Junior; but a mother sure and undeniable——

Why, that was the end!

Unless this Long Level country house were in reality an asylum, it was scarcely likely that both the Little Man and his spouse should be insane. And if they were both insane, the chances were infinitely small of their both suffering from the same delusion!

Himself maddened, Tony, as the train stopped for breath before beginning its cautious progress across the Susquehanna Bridge, half rose from his plush seat.

The Little Man gently pushed him back.

"I should not have told you. The excitement! But she will be overjoyed. I assure you."

"Oh, look here——" began Tony.

"My dear son! You wouldn't let your frenzy drive you from me? If you do not consider me—if you will not consider your mother——"

What did it all mean? Tony was sure only that it meant something sinister.

"Consider her!" he cried. "That's just it: this mother-stuff!"

"Then consider yourself," the Little Man concluded. He still smiled, though sadly

now; his breath whistled more distinctly than ever through his pauses. "Alone. A strange town. Why, I and your name on the discharge paper that I got you are all that could prove your identity!"

CHAPTER III

THE STRANGE TAVERN

His identity, indeed! The Little Man had placed a delicate but steady finger on the chink in Tony's armour.

During the days when this new father had been arranging his son's discharge, there were many discussions between Knight and the doctors and Knight and the nurses, when the patient thought it was well to simulate brief lapses of consciousness. He heard nothing really enlightening about his guardian; he heard little that, as an amnesia patient, he might not legitimately have inquired after; but he heard much that, now recalled, disquieted him.

Once it was Soprano that said:

"His identity disc was gone when they found him."

And Tenor demanded:

"But soldiers wear division insignia, don't they? Something of that kind? On their uniforms, you know?"

"The explosion must have burned his blouse right off his back."

Tony was not surprised to hear it. He was quite clear about the explosion: the wonder was that it had left him anything. The men gathered in that shell-hole had, he recalled, lost their several units: the loss of all else seemed a logical consequence.

Soprano was continuing:

"The others were blown to pieces or burned to cinder. The only information that came over with this one was that the American line had been up to that place and fell back: when it advanced again, he was found. I think there were bits of eleven bodies altogether, but two of them were probably Germans', the report said."

Even at the memory of this quotation at this moment, the soldier-spirit in Tony gasped indignation. There was the Army for you! He remembered distinctly: six stray Americans, thrown into temporary companionship, had started for refuge in that hole; two were shot on the way; the remainder found, at their destination, ten Hanovrians, working machine guns; the four killed the ten. But, of course, an H.Q. report must minimize enlisted men's prowess! Angered truth had heaved at

Tony's gullet, teetered on his tongue; here and now——

He had gone into that shell-hole Corporal Anthony Tortona, C Co., 145 Infantry, Second Division. By the crazy chance that the Little Man offered him, by the fear of Lottie's determined claims and by his own impulsive freak, he had, in effect, come out of it John J. Knight, Jr., Private, F Co., 116th Machine Gun Battalion, 32nd Division, first reported missing and then falsely reported dead.

Whether through cunning or the rambling chance of loquacity, the Little Man pinioned him to his seat.

The victim surrendered. Because Americus was not wholly unknown to him, and because his memory was present, but also because he would find it exceedingly difficult to account for the red chevrons on Anthony Tortona's sleeve by John J. Knight, Jr.'s discharge, he surrendered. He would not draw back from this adventure—just yet. He would go to Long Level, wherever exactly that was, and from there he would run as fast and as far as his legs would carry him, as soon as he could salvage a suit of citizen's clothes after Mrs. Knight had begun her inevitable denunciation.

It was to be hoped that no other new relatives would turn up!

"We get out at Blunstonville," said the Little Man.

But when they reached the other end of the bridge, he became as shy as Tony. His bright glance swept the brief station platform before he left the car. Then he snapped "All right!", seized his ward by one arm and, swinging him to the ground, turned him sharply right-face. Before Tony could feel the cold through his leggings, they were going at double-time down a rough old tow-path, between the grey rushing river and an empty canal-cut.

The young man's strength had returned to him long before his memory, but, although encumbered by nothing save a musette-bag, he needed all that strength for the ensuing journey. The Little Man carried a large and handsome suit-case of patent leather, yet he showed an energy that would have scorned any burden; he danced along with smiling lips; having resigned himself to the spoiling of his spats, he recked nothing of their total destruction, nor yet of the bemiring of his other clothes to the waist; he covered distance as gaily as if he were crossing a friend's

drawing-room. More than once, Tony's military pride was taxed to hold the pace with him.

They were soon clear of the village, and then the way became steadily worse. It reminded Tony of the roads about Montfaucon. Every few miles, the tow-path had been broken away altogether, and the pedestrians had to climb down one piece of it and up the next. On their left, there was nothing but the deserted river, a broad sweep of swirling water, with empty islands belched forth between raging eddies, and beyond these, dormant brown hills that only once in a long distance showed some tiny house huddling between precipitous earth and galloping stream. On their right, lay the dried and cluttered canal-bed, and, behind that, other steep hills covered by thick growths of trees and dank underbrush. Except for the perpetual clamour of the river, there reigned a perpetual silence that would have stifled the vast scene. Again and again, the walkers turned the base of a mountain and were as much cut off from everything that they had just stepped out of as if they had passed into another world.

Notwithstanding his pace, the Little Man for mile on mile talked and quoted con-

tinuously. He gave lectures on the sources of Shakespeare; criticized accepted readings of the text; analyzed, and now and then impersonated, the characters. It was almost as if he were babbling in order that Tony—who, in fact, had no wish to speak—must keep silence.

"'The icy fang,'" said the Little Man as they turned a fresh hill and received the full strength of another blast of cold——

> "'This is no flattery; these are the councillors
> That feelingly persuade me what I am.'

This countryside! That it should appear new to you: what a privilege! I wonder what you think of it——"

He had not intended to hear, but Tony interrupted by saying forcibly what he thought of the countryside.

"Dear me," said the Little Man. "Really? But in a few weeks, winter will be dead. Spring will be sowing flowers on its grave. A few more weeks and the snakes will be sunning their shining bodies along this then verdant tow-path."

"Snakes?" echoed Tony. "Water-snakes?"

"A few. Not many. For the most part,

the *ancistrodon contortrix*. So long and golden brown and beautiful. Their heads like so many burnished crowns."

"Are they poisonous?"

"Copperheads? Deadly. And so unlike the rattler: he is Roman. The copperhead has the true spirit of the Renaissance: he gives no warning."

The river, despite its incredible swiftness, was the colour of a stream of lead and seemed to have such a stream's consistency. The old canal resembled an open grave; it resembled the trenches. The country grew wilder and wilder. Then, at a long last, the guide's gait, which had slackened, quickened as a man's does when he nears his own door, and Tony gave a careful look around him, for he guessed that they were approaching their journey's end.

The steepest hill he had ever seen, high enough to be called a mountain, and, what with trees and undergrowth, as dark as night, jutted into the canal-bed, and the canal-bed emptied into a rotting lock, perhaps forty feet deep, with perpendicular sides slippery and green and a bottom full of black and shining mud, which must have come greedily over the head of anybody unlucky enough to fall into

it. This on the one side; then the strip of tow-path whereon the travellers balanced; on the other side of that the river roared in two miles of flood and torrent, whirlpool, gurge and vortex: nothing on its distant shore save more hills, steep and dark and uninhabited.

Something there however was nearer by: one lonesome thing. The river, the noise of which was ever in one's ears, had eaten into the tow-path until the outer side of that was like the side of a shelled house, and Tony looked over into a churning millrace in which no boat, it seemed certain—not to mention any man—could live a full minute. There was a thick, narrow band of fog lying a short distance above the water, and, it might be twenty yards out, Tony could see the bulk of an island; then came the fog, and, over the fog, standing as if based on it, a rambling, two-story, white house.

Most houses suggest people, even if they are people long in their graves; but not so this. So far as the soldier could see, no smoke ascended from its desolate chimneys: the moss-grown roof now sagged, now bulged, and the windows, where they were not masked by splintered shutters, showed blind panes thick with dirt, or broken into long daggers

of glass. Such tokens of desertion are always depressing, but never unfamiliar; when they occur, they are at least memorials of a life past: hopeful hands have built the walls; they have sheltered, it may be, sorrows, even faults or crimes; yet they at least declare that they have housed human beings. Poised on a cloud-wreath, this building seemed never to have been built; it suggested no creature with breath in his nostrils and love and fire in his heart; it was as wild and remorseless, and as much a part of the natural scenery about it, as if it had been heaved out of the long cold earth by the same convulsion, or hewn by the same erosion, that brought forth the frigid river and the implacable hills.

Tony looked at it open-mouthed, and, as he looked, a strange feeling crept over him. He felt that, for the last quarter-hour, he had expected this place.

"What is it?" he asked, but he was sure of the answer.

"Our country place," said the Little Man. "Years ago it joined to the tow-path. The ice cut a channel. It is the old Cross Keys Tavern."

He put his strong hands to his diminutive mouth and emitted an uncanny, wild cry like

a screech-owl's. Twice he repeated it. Tony, who could scarcely believe his guide capable of such, or so much, sound, doubted that any other lungs might bridge the clamour of the rapids; yet, shortly, there came an answer from the fog.

"Carefully!" cried the Little Man.

His lean fingers jerked Tony to the edge of the slimy lock. Something creaked loudly overhead, and what resembled a telegraph-pole began to descend out of the mist, one end toward the travellers, the other lost in the fog.

At last it grated on the cinders.

"Our bridge," smiled the Little Man. "Rustic. Romantic. Not really dangerous. Lowered by a windlass. Come!"

The upper side of the pole had been planed to a certain flatness, and the Little Man hopped to it and began to mince nimbly across, above the howling water, as unconcernedly as he might stroll down the main street of distant Blunstonville.

"Come!" he repeated, looking carelessly back over his padded shoulders at a reluctant Tony.

Tony shook his head. "After you, Alphonse. You can do all the tight-rope stunts

you've a mind to; I'm going to straddle it."

There was unconcealed asperity in the Little Man's answer, and in his eyes the same gleam that there had been when he first spoke to Tony at the hospital; but he was still smiling as he said:

"You're not afraid?"

"A little," Tony serenely responded; "and I'm not a suicide, either—but if you don't look where you're going, *you'll* be one."

The caution was unheeded. The Little Man proceeded with experienced dexterity.

"Come, come!" he urged.

"You should worry," Tony re-assured him; "I'm too anxious to see mother to hang back any."

He waited, nevertheless, until the fog had almost swallowed his protesting leader. Then he mounted the pole as if it were a bucking broncho and worked himself along it with his hands.

Once he looked at the watery turmoil below him; but he looked quickly away. He could feel the spray on his shins, and he was sick and dizzy. . . .

Then he was on the other side. The pole was worked by a great windlass, as the Little Man had said, and beside this stood a creature

that reminded him of the giant's wife in the fairy tale.

Tony had had the advantage of a course of English at Madison-and-Adams; but he was a genuinely human young person, and he had been overseas with the A.E.F.; he always thought in the vernacular:

"Gee," he thought now; "I ought to have remembered they always marry big ones. Here is sure where I get what's coming to me!"

CHAPTER IV

"SOMETHING IN THE NIGHT"

"I HOPE it's the hired woman," pursued Tony.

She could have taken his feet in her big hands and ripped him apart. Her sleeves were rolled up for her work at the windlass, and her arms ("All beef," reflected Tony, as admiration tinctured his awe) were the size of the legs of an Eighteen-Seventy piano. She had a large, square face, with a mouth like a bear-trap, closed. More than a trace of black moustache was visible on her long upper lip, and her eyes were a winter-grey, like the river, or the eyes of the fish that lived in it. A gigantic, glum, silent woman, she appeared as cold as a cake of ice, and as expressionless. During his single and memorable Paris leave, which was the time that Tony saw the cotton-set peaches at the confectioner's, he had gone to the Louvre, with a promiscuous party conducted by a "Y" secretary; he noted there some portraits by an artist that the secretary called "France

Halls"; the boys said they were "bitter": this woman resembled the bitterest.

"It *must* be the hired woman," he decided.

The Little Man had been whispering to her. He raised his voice as Tony descended from the wooden broncho.

"Well, Mother," said the Little Man; "Our Boy!"

The giantess gave Our Boy such a look as she might have granted a rabbit that a servant brought home, and began winding the windlass and drawing up the precarious bridge as easily as if she were mixing a batter. The Little Man cocked an indulgent eye at Tony and waited until the task was completed; then:

"Now, my dear! 'Your boy that was, your son that is—your child that shall be!' A kiss, a kiss!"

"Here," said Tony to himself, "it comes at last; and how I'm to make a get-away with that bridge hauled up, I don't know."

But she did not knock him down, and she did not denounce him. She stood over him like a hippopotamus and gave him the peck of a canary.

"Say 'Welcome home,'" the Little Man suggested.

The giantess opened the bear-trap. "Welcome home," she echoed; but her voice was a bass.

Tony said nothing; he could not say anything. After all, was the woman crazy, too? Did she share her husband's delusion? Or was she humouring him and reserving for his guest's private ear her opinion of his graceless conduct? Always ready to dodge a blow, Tony marched between the queerly contrasted pair up the hill on which the white house stood and around to the side of it that faced the river.

Here was a very different picture from that presented to the nearer shore. A thick growth of sombre pines hid much of the old tavern from the water-front, but there was a space of well-tended lawn, and, though either end of the building was in a state of decay as advanced as that portion visible from the York County shore, the central showed signs of occupation, even of considerable care. It was clear that the Little Man and his huge wife preferred to inhabit the parts least open to observation.

The oaken door stuck, but the giantess pushed it easily. She strode in ahead of Tony, and the Little Man, following him, closed the

door as gently as if somebody were dying upstairs. He double-locked it.

The room in which they now stood had evidently been given its present dimensions by the removal of several partitions. It extended the full width of the house, but the windows toward the canal-cut were closely shuttered. Blackened rafters supported the ceiling, and at one end of the place a Colonial staircase ran along the wall to a wide landing and thence, by seven steps, descended to the floor.

The walls were plastered, but unadorned; only a few rag-rugs lay on the much-scrubbed boards underfoot. A grandfather's clock ticked assertively from one corner. A table, perhaps six feet across, stood in the middle of the apartment, and there were a few kitchen chairs about. At the end opposite the stairs was an immense open fireplace; it must have communicated with a chimney on the Doncaster County front, for a wood fire roared in it, and at it the giantess did her cooking: a score of shining copper pots and pans hung on iron hooks near by.

"We are primitive," explained the Little Man gaily. "Very. But happy. You will see. Wash here." He indicated a sort of

kitchen-sink in which stood several pails of water. "Myself, I am rather a reserved man. Perform my ablutions in my own precincts."

He left, the front door key dangling from one of his long fingers. The giantess set about getting dinner without so much as a look at Tony; there was nothing for him to do but wash and wait. Once he asked if he could offer any help, but she only shook her massive head. He took a chair in a corner and wondered when he would waken. . . .

As the evening went on, he began to believe that he would never waken. The rude table was covered by delicate napery and lighted with candles in heavy silver candlesticks, brought from somewhere upstairs. The Little Man reappeared in precise dinner-clothes, with a bottle of wine in either hand and one under each short arm. The giantess, who cooked and waited on table and ate with them, too, was a mistress of the household art: there was a thin soup in thin dishes; a bit of fish; potatoes and onions, and a turkey roasted on a spit before their eyes; there was a salad, and there was excellent coffee.

The giantess said nothing. Tony dared say only next to it. The Little Man quoted his particular author and drank most of the wine.

He grew more and more suave; finally, he offered the soldier cigarettes from a golden pocket-case.

"And now," said the Little Man, standing at his place in the assured manner of the accustomed toastmaster, "charge your glasses. I am about to give you—the Guest of the Evening."

He looked at the giantess. She had a tiny glass in her mighty fist: it was empty.

"There, Maria," said the Little Man generously. He spared her a few drops. "Your heart, you know," he reminded her.

Tony guessed that *he* was to have no more because it was his health that was to be proposed.

"We have with us to-night," said the Little Man, leaning lightly on the extended fingers of his left hand, "someone who has come among us from afar. Affectionately welcome. All that we have is his. 'A poor thing, but mine own.'" He glanced at Maria. "This newcomer has served his country well. Given her a costly sacrifice. Some give limbs. Some life. Some buy Liberty Bonds. He gave his memory."

The speaker passed his ringed fingers across his brow; then picked up his glass:

"But he is safe at last. With us to-night. With us forever:

"'Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by the sun of York;
And all the clouds that lower'd upon our house
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.
Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths;
Our bruisèd arms hung up for monuments;
Our stern alarums changed to merry meetings,
Our dreadful marches to delightful measures:
Grim-visaged War hath smooth'd his wrinkled front.'

Ladies and Gentlemen"—the Little Man waved his glass to an imaginary company—"the Hero of the Occasion! Maria, our dear nephew!"

Tony, in burning embarrassment, but not sure whether he wasn't being made fun of, had been gazing hard at the table. As the Little Man declared this new relationship, he started up, and his eyes, travelling toward the speaker, saw behind him into the shadows of the stairway. It was very dark there, but it seemed to Tony that a door opened from one side of their final descent and that there peeped therefrom a pale, childish, large-eyed face.

There were a hundred ways to account for it, but Tony's nerves were on edge.

"*What's that?*" he shouted, and pointed behind the Little Man.

The Little Man's glass fell with a smash of broken crystal. He turned. He darted into the shadows. A door closed, and he disappeared.

Tony started after him.

Instantly he was caught in a mighty grip. Maria was detaining him: no chain and staple could have held him more helpless.

"That's nussing," growled Maria's bass. "You wait here."

The Little Man was back almost as she said it.

"How you startled me!" he smiled. "What did you think you saw?"

Tony began to feel rather sheepish. "I thought I saw somebody at that door, and I didn't know there was a door there."

"Somebody?" The Little Man cocked his curly head.

"A child: a little girl."

"Ah," said the host. He was wiping, with a napkin, a red stain of spilled wine on his shirt-front. "There is a little girl here. An orphan. Under our protection. She has some trivial household tasks. But in bed long ago; eh, my dear?"

Maria nodded.

"I'm sorry," said Tony. "I guess you

got my goat when you made that break about our relationship."

The Little Man puckered his rosebud mouth and raised his eyebrows.

"You called me your nephew," explained Tony.

"But, my dear boy, what else are you?"

Tony felt the floor heave under him.

"Why, you said I was your son!"

The Little Man minced around the table and gently laid hold of the soldier's nearer arm.

"There, there!" he said. "You are tired. You have forgotten again. Talk of it to-morrow. Now to bed. Eh, Maria?"

"*Shalfrich*," rumbled Maria.

"She agrees with me," her husband interpreted. "'O sleep, O gentle sleep, Nature's soft nurse!' Second Henry IV. You need it, my boy. Badly."

Tony must have needed it. Otherwise, he would have been more discreet:

"But, Mr. Knight, you told me in the hospital——"

Fronting him, the Little Man said with sad distinctness:

"My poor lad, you never were in a hospital. I am not Mr. Knight. I am Martin

F. T. Merriweather—Martin Farquhar Tupper Merriweather. You are my wife's nephew, Sammy Swope. Son of her late brother, Jacob. Otherwise, 'Big Jake.' Not what he should have been, I regret to say. Ill-treated you. On Welsh Mountain. But you are all right now. Come to bed."

Well, it was no harder to be Sammy Swope than Johnnie Knight, or whatever the name had been! It was a little confusing to change so rapidly, that was all. Tony felt a bit ashamed of himself. He looked at Maria, but Maria pointed with a thick, yellow forefinger to the stairs, and presently the Little Man had shown him up them and several paces down a dark hall.

There he opened a door.

"Here you are," he said kindly. "There are no candles to spare. But you will find it a good bed."

Tony heard the breath whistling through his guardian's lips as the door closed. . . .

The room was black, but there was a greyish patch at what must be the window, and the soldier felt his way to a bed some yards from it.

He was too tired and too amazed to hesitate, and the Army habit of obedience was still

strong upon him. He felt the bed; it *was* a good one; Tony decided that the best thing he could do was to use it. If he tried now to puzzle what was the matter with his new uncle and aunt, he would himself go insane. At present, he was fairly well off: the food was excellent; he had lodged in the trenches; even if he was in Pennsylvania, this island was too lonely for Lottie ever to find him here—he was as safe as if he were in a dug-out. He stripped to his O.D. shirt and tumbled among the covers. Every puzzling thing would keep until to-morrow. . . .

That is the way he felt at first; but somehow, notwithstanding his fatigue, he could not go at once to sleep. He heard the Little Man mincing about downstairs. He heard Aunt Maria crush her way up, pass his door without pause and close another door several feet away. He heard her husband moving to and fro for half an hour longer, and then he heard him mount the steps, with infinitely lighter tread, and trip far down the passage. After that, there should have been nothing to hear except the straining of the pines, whenever a breeze blew, and the roar of the river that, to be sure, never ceased, night or day.

There ought to have been nothing more; but there was.

The old house sounded as if it had evil dreams and could not rest. It was full of a stillness that itself was full of sounds. A slate rattled on the roof; crumbs of plaster would fall behind the wainscoting; a mouse would gnaw, or squeak, or patter overhead, and the stairs groaned: there might have been a steady procession of ghosts up and down them. Once, Tony could have sworn that somebody was standing outside his door.

At the front, a man learns that he does not count for much alone; he acquires the habit of doing everything that he does because everybody else does it: eating at a certain time in a certain way, wearing a uniform. Even when he goes over the top, he goes because he is one of a going group, and when he gets there, what carries him on so that he cannot feel his feet under him, and so that he knows nothing can stop him any more than if he were a charge of angels, is precisely the fact that he is not anybody, but everybody: that he is not a man, but a part of a squad or platoon, a company or regiment. This being alone, however, this lying still and waiting for he knew not what, this being sure that some-

thing would happen without being sure what it would be, except that it would be something that had never happened to him before: Tony did not like it.

Of course, at last he slept a little. He would doze, and wake, and doze again. He dreamed, though of nothing remotely connected with his present state, and each time he woke, he was more restless than the time before. In spite of having said that he would not do it, he began going over and over all that had happened to him since his present host came to the hospital; and always it seemed more and more sinister. Presently, instead of Tony's going over and over it, the thing began going over and over him—or not over and over, but around and 'round with him: there was no end to it; it was a circle.

If only to get out of it, to see something sane, reasonable, familiar, he became possessed of the idea that he must look out of his window. Yet it took him—and he was as brave as the average young fellow—several hours, he was sure, to secure the courage to start, and, once he had placed his toes on the cold floor, he let long minutes elapse between each pair of steps.

The window was narrow, and a stout piece

of plank had been nailed across its centre from the outside.

Tony strained to look out, but all that he could see was so much of the island as lay directly in front of him. Clouds were racing over a dull sky; the wind had risen steadily and was like an old woman scolding the noisy river, with now and then a spatter of cold rain, as if she would break down and cry. He could see many pines and a few bare deciduous trees, with brown spots under them, and then thin layers of snow; but he did not see what he sought; everything looked unnatural in the deceitful half-light that comes long before the winter morning.

His teeth clicked together. He so shook with the chill air that he had to put his hand on the wall to brace himself; but he stood there like a sentry, for somehow the getting out of bed had cleared his mind, and he began to receive a glimmer of illumination upon his position toward the Little Man.

The Little Man must have had a nephew in the war, and the boy must have been reported killed.

" He wouldn't dare to fake anything about the casualty reports," thought Tony.

Why the nephew had first been a son was

more than might yet be conjectured. So was the answer to the puzzle of Tony's assigned rôle. But to a more pressing question Tony seized the solution:

"Which of the two's crazy: the Little Man or Maria?"

Tony saw it:

Nobody was crazy, and neither host nor hostess had ever mistaken him for anybody.

Then one thing more: Nobody was crazy, but the Little Man thought Tony nearly so. The Little Man did not know Tony, but he did not know, for that matter, that Tony was certain of himself. He believed he had succeeded in using suggestion upon No. 27 at the hospital, and now he was preparing to use other suggestions on the patient brought home.

"I must look something like his nephew," thought Tony, "and he's going to begin training me to *be* his nephew. Why? That's getting back to the start again; that's what I've got to find out: what his little game is."

He attacked the maze once more:

"He has me here; he has me dead to rights. But I have one thing on him: I have him thinking he has it *all* on me. The only thing I've got to do is to keep him thinking so; the

only thing I've got to do is to play safe and keep my eyes open——"

He was just at that when he leaped backwards, in a single bound, against his bed.

From somewhere—somewhere in the big, low house—there came a long shriek. It was piercing. It was a shriek of mortal pain and more than mortal terror—and after that there was not another sound.

Tony dived for the door and wrenched at its knob.

The door was locked, and the key was not on Tony's side.

CHAPTER V

THE PRISON WITHOUT WALLS

TONY re-enforced his grip on the knob and drew back to smash the panel.

But he did not smash it. Immediately behind that frightful cry, the silence had re-descended. It was so complete that it was as if the voice that had cried was crushed beneath a sudden weight; and at once, from such a deed, stillness spread through the old house again. It settled between him and the door, soft and thick: a black pad that he thought for a moment would resist his utmost effort.

Would it resist? His reason repelled the sick fancy, but his imagination evoked the noise of his contemplated act, and his still unsettled nerves revolted against reality.

As he stood there, shivering in the darkness, the whole building sank into its earlier mood; the same slate rattled on the roof, the same mouse scampered overhead, and bruised logic was drafted to the service of defending quiescence. There had been nothing but a

cry; had anybody been in need of help, there would have been more cries than one. Tony remembered what few soldiers forget: he remembered the terrified sounds of sleeping soldiers who were brave men when waking. To-night he had heard again the voice of nightmare; youth's dread of appearing ridiculous urged him to return to sleep.

He listened. The silence remained profound. Perhaps that German shell still owned its power over him. He would seek an explanation in the morning. He would go to bed again, although he could not sleep. . . .

The sunlight woke him. Tony saw his room neat and clean, though furnished only with a dressing-table, a washstand and the narrow bed, and with but a thin rag-rug covering a scanty portion of the worm-eaten flooring.

He hurried to the door: it opened at his touch, and from below there mounted the pleasant fumes of frying sausage. Half believing the nightmare his own, he went toward the clothes carefully folded on the bed-foot: they were a good suit of mufti—he had put there the wearisome uniform!

Tony came downstairs composedly. That note of the changed clothes had decided him: so long, he repeated, as these people believed

him mentally deficient, they were somewhat in his power; he would play the rôle that they had assigned him until they revealed enough of their purpose to graft conviction on accusation.

The ground-floor room was cheerful with the light from the unshuttered windows on the Doncaster County side. Maria's vast back concealed all view of the open fire before which she was busy, but Mr. Merriweather, already seated at table, greeted him with a smiling cock of the fluffy white head and a quotation:

> "'This morning, like the spirit of a youth
> That means to be of note, begins betimes.'

We are early risers—like most people who have nothing to do. You slept well? I trust you slept well."

He himself appeared to have slept excellently. He did something more than justice to Maria's sausage and fried mush; he drank three large cups of steaming coffee, but, though he twittered like the morning sparrows to Tony, who was not to be outdone as a trencherman, he made not the least reference to last evening's change in his guest's identity.

He made, indeed, only one reference to any

event of the past: there was that little servant in the house—more friend than servant—a poor child—rescued from an abominable institution near Oil City. If Tony met her—*when* he met her—he was to be gentle—he was not to upset her once sadly abused and always delicately balanced brain. It was grievous; they did what they could; but still—still——

"You must see our island. Walk about. Explore for yourself. Pleasant now; more pleasant soon. All this countryside has suffered from a severe winter." He said that an Amish village, fifteen miles back in the hills, had been snowed-in for three weeks a month since; nearly all of its thirty families had one or more victims from influenza; no doctors could come in and no dead be taken out. "But the ice in the river broke long ago. Soon we shall have a real rain. When it stops—gentle Spring!"

Wondering at the offered freedom, Tony accepted it. He went out. The noise of the river boxed his ears as he opened the door; the strip of lawn, though browned by the past season's frosts, and still showing patches of snow, gave even clearer evidences of care than had been observable at his first sight of it

The air was bracing: he started for a stroll around the island.

It was less than a quarter of a mile in length and, at its widest, not three hundred yards across. Heavy pines shrouded all of its shores except that one nearest the tow-path, where a past ice gorge had created it by steep severance from the hill foot. The farther river shore was two miles away, the nearer accessible only by the bridge, and, although the view from the water front extended far to the north-west and the south-east, it included no sign of any house save this old inn, no other token of anything human.

Five minutes sufficed to explain the flimsy mystery of Merriweather's sending Tony forth unaccompanied. Whatever precautions might be taken to keep him from the rest of the house, he was given the daylight liberty of the island because the island itself was a prison.

It was a prison with exceeding watchful jailors. Tony had the sensation of being spied upon whenever within sight of the former tavern. Even from its shuttered side, he felt eyes looking out of suspected crevices.

He tested this: went to the bridge windlass; it was secured by a heavy chain and padlock, and he had no more than verified that

than a door opened noisily, and Tony, turning quickly, saw Maria standing within ten yards of him. She said nothing; she held an empty dishpan; but he noted that she held it in her left hand, and that her right held something else concealed in the pocket of her wide apron.

Had Merriweather sent him out to convince whatever mind the prisoner had of his helplessness? He came across a ladder, stowed, but none too carefully, under the trees at the edge of the lawn: it was too short to reach the nearer shore, but more than long enough for anybody to have used in barring his window. He studied the rambling contours of the house: its second story was plainly a series of inn-rooms ranged on either side of a corridor. He had glimpsed, as he left his own room, a door blocking this hallway some two-thirds down its length; looking beyond the point of the peaked roof that must be above that door, he saw a skylight there; it evidently had been cut at a far later date than that of the construction of the building; probably it served Merriweather's particular quarters; the windows in the wall below it had long been boarded over.

Tony went deep into the pines, but to no purpose. At the extreme end of the island,

these fell away and left a natural, moss-grown clearing in the centre of which stood the desolate trunk of an old black oak; at its foot was a little hole: it looked like the emptied grave of a child. The place had an unpleasant fascination; he broke from it and returned hastily to the common-room.

He had not been five minutes out of sight of the house. The room was deserted, but it was a fresh desertion; Tony received the impression that somebody had left it at the instant of his entrance. The door under the stairs was open and innocent. It apparently led, through a short passage, to the back quarters; the wall to which it gave immediate access were lined with shelves, and the shelves with bottles: it was Merriweather's wine-closet.

Merriweather himself ambled down the stairs as Tony surveyed it. He nearly wept over the reflection that the country had "gone dry." He told how an excellent local wine used to be made, and illegally sold, years ago, on the slopes of the wild Welsh Mountain, over in Doncaster County, by lesser members of Abe Buzzard's banditti.

"After Abe was killed by a posse, the traffic died. Sebastian Vink assumed leader-

ship: a terrible man; the worst—the very worst. Raised the organization's activities from highway-robbery to bank-robbery. Never himself appearing. But certainly guilty of unnumbered thefts. More than a few murders. Particularly cold-blooded. Entering a peaceful farmhouse. A hot poker at the feet of the farmer's wife to make her husband tell where he hid his savings. Then a cut throat. Perhaps the throats of both. Dear, dear! Well born and brought up, too."

Tony let him run on. He encouraged him by such questions as suited the assumed mental state of the questioner. There are few intoxicants more exhilarating than to be dealt with as a fool by somebody that is really in your power, and Tony enjoyed his spree. It was not suspended until Merriweather excused himself to go to his studio: he confessed shyly to a passion for painting that now and then interfered with his Shakespearian studies.

"But go about. When you choose. The island: your home as well as ours. You must learn it and love it. We do."

It was later that something unpleasant happened. Tony had gone forth again. He walked to the down-stream end of the island.

As he came back, he saw the flutter of cloth in the shadow of one of the trees.

There was a little girl. Her pipe-stem legs, over which the darned stockings sagged, ended in patched brogans far too large for her. The wasted arms hung before her, her wasted hands clasped. The apron that covered her from chin to knee was indubitably cut down from Maria's uses. The child's dark hair was twisted into a little knot on the top of her narrow head, and the peaked, pale face with its big, frightened eyes was the face that had startled him, the night before, at the door of the closet-passage under the stairs.

She gave a quick cry at sight of him—a cry the more appealing because of her instant endeavour to suppress it—and started to scuttle toward the house.

"Wait a minute," said Tony. Children liked him, and he had a way with them. "I won't hurt you, little girl."

She paused in pained hesitation. Tony wondered whether she did not pause merely from an habitual fear of refusing anything to anybody. She gave a scared glance at the house.

"Do you belong to *them?*" she asked.

Her voice was abnormally hollow and abnormally mature.

"No, I don't belong to anybody. I used to belong to the Army."

"You was a soldier?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"In the War."

"No, you wasn't." He had frightened her. "I seen lots o' soldiers 'at was in the war, onct: they're all got grey hair, an' you ain't."

She backed away.

"This was another war," he hurriedly explained, "a new one. They had young soldiers in it. I don't belong to the Merriweathers. Won't you let me talk to you?"

"Ef you don't belong to them, you'd best not be talkin' to me. You'd best git out o' here."

Tony came over and stood between her and the inn.

"Oh, I'm not afraid of them. They won't hurt me. What's your name?"

For the first time, she gave him her eyes; she gave them slowly. Then, at full sight of him, her confidence swiftly followed:

"I'm Ellie."

"Ellie what?"

"Just Ellie. Folks used to call me Ellie Dubendorf still."

"How old are you?"

"I dunno. Fourteen, I guess." She was becoming nervous again. She gave the air of being rarely talked to. "*Don't* you know these here people?"

"No, I don't. That's just it: I want you to tell me something about them."

It was bad strategy. "Oh, I don't know nothin'. Honest to Gawd!"

Tony attacked on another flank. "Have you been here long?"

"Ever so."

"Where did you come from?"

"The 'Sylum."

"At Oil City?" Then, as she nodded, he pursued: "That's a long way. Did you like it there?"

"It was awful." She was quite free to speak of something so distant. "Sometimes they wasn't hardly nothin' to eat. You 'most froze, 'cept in bed. They made you work hard—oh, *hard!* An' they beat you, too."

"And then you came here. Do many people come here? Just to visit, you know?"

"Not any more—much."

"But some?"

Ellie frowned. "Onct in a while, nights. Not like you: not nice. An' *they* don't want 'em."

"Did anybody come here last night, Ellie?"

She shook her head.

"I thought I heard someone."

Ellie's face was set.

"I thought I heard someone crying."

"I gotta go now," said Ellie.

Tony placed a kindly hand on her shoulder. The bones rose sharp under his touch.

"Listen, Ellie: if you talk to me a little, maybe I can help you. I won't tell, and don't you: it'll be just our secret."

"You kin't help," she said.

"Yes, I can. You don't know. Tell me who it was cried in the night."

She wrung her hands. "Might 'a' been me. I do—most every night, I do."

"But it wasn't you this time."

"I dunno."

She did know. He saw it. "Do you want to get away from here?"

The sad little face lightened. It became almost pretty. "Oh,"—she put out a thin, hopeful, unbelieving hand—"ef you *could!*"

"I'll try."

"O Mister, ef I could jist git back to the 'Sylum!"

"Then tell me who it was cried last night."

Her thin throat worked. She stood atiptoe. He bent to listen. She whispered: "Her!"

"Mrs. Merriweather?" The thing was unbelievable. "Why on earth did she cry?"

It was the faintest whisper now: "Somebody—somebody hurts her sometimes. She's afraid."

CHAPTER VI

MAROONED

THE child was not half-witted: he couldn't dismiss her hinted story thus. Neglect at the Asylum and something else—something afterward—had retarded her development; but her observation and memory were sound. She was the victim of long-continued fear.

"Somebody hurts Mrs. Merriweather? Who?" He stroked her shoulder. "Tell me, Ellie," he coaxed; "who hurts her?"

But Ellie seized his free hand in both of hers. "Oh, kin you reely git me out o' here? Back to the 'Sylum? Kin you? *Will* you, Mister? Please?"

What nameless horror lay behind the dread that made her long for escape from this quiet island to the starvation and blows of the orphanage?

"Ellie," he said, "I want you to trust me. I want you to tell me——"

"*There she is!*"

Ellie could not see the house. Tony had carefully placed himself to hide her from it and it from her. Nevertheless, he knew what her interruption meant and knew, before he turned, that she was correct: he turned and saw Maria at an open window.

"O, my Gawd!" the girl whimpered.

Before he could interfere, she was half-way to the inn. The face of its mistress, if he could at that distance at all determine it, was as expressionless as ever; but the action of the child sufficed: she was running forward with a repulsive cringing movement, like that of the obedient dog who knows what he has to expect from the summons of an enraged master.

Tony's impulse was to follow and defend; but reason restrained it. He could be of ultimate service only by temporarily masking suspicion. He walked, therefore, at a leisurely pace to the front of the house and sauntered into the common-room: Maria was ahead of him, preparing a heavy luncheon.

"And by the way," chirped the cheerful Merriweather, when he had finally sat down to it, "I should have cautioned you last evening. A clamorous spot, this. Particularly

after dark. Though nobody but ourselves, for miles and miles to hear. Sometimes stray dogs howl on the tow-path. Foxes in the hills. A wolf now and then. Or a wildcat. My poor wife, too—a weak heart. Suffers from nightmare." He shook his head, but smiled immediately:

"'Be not afraid; the isle is full of noises' Don't let them disturb you."

At that time, nothing more, and not much more when they met again for another excellent dinner. Tony had passed the afternoon in pondering. What was the secret of that night-cry? Who could hurt the herculean Maria? Merriweather? Tony smiled at the idea. But if not Merriweather? Was there somebody else on the island? The prisoner made a further fruitless reconnaissance of his St. Helena, a further revolving of plans, of which one after another was negatived by the stern necessity of waiting.

The evening meal resembled its predecessor in all respects but one: little Merriweather, after consuming the lion's share of the wine, said a smiling something to his wife in Pennsylvania-Dutch.

Maria's heavy brows came slowly together. "*Dos ist g'farlich,*" she rumbled.

Across the table, in the light of the candles, Merriweather met her eyes with eyes that suddenly shone like blue arc lamps.

"*Ich war shloga,*" he warned her. "*Horcha!*"

Tony bent over his coffee, but he gave a rapid glance at Maria. The big creature visibly quailed, and the sight was unpleasant. Without a word of protest or appeal, she lumbered through the door beneath the stairs.

"Of course you don't understand this barbarous dialect?" Merriweather, again all smiles, was addressing Tony.

Wouldn't Maria's nephew understand Pennsylvania-Dutch? And would her husband ask such a question of the nephew? Tony thought quickly, but decided that this was no trap: the dialect had been employed in order to keep him in the dark.

"I'll say I don't." He did not understand much of it, but he understood enough to know that Maria had declared something to be dangerous and that her husband had replied with a threat and a command.

"Nor I," averred Merriweather. "Or very imperfectly. Apologize for its use. My poor wife. Few advantages. Brought up on the Berks County side of the Welsh Moun-

tain. Merely asked her to bring. Ah, they come!"

The door under the stairs had opened again. Before it stood Maria. With one large hand, she hauled the mutely resisting Ellie.

"My dear Ellie," said Merriweather, "come here."

The child's eyes widened. Tony felt that she wanted to look to him for protection, but that she could not take her gaze from her master. Slowly, a faltering step at a time, she came forward. Tony could see her dragging legs tremble. He made up his mind that if any overt cruelty should be attempted, he would kill Merriweather on the spot.

But Merriweather, when the girl finally fawned beside him, merely put a hand on her arm.

"I wanted you to see our ward and helper," he said to Tony. "This is little Ellie."

"I saw her to-day." Tony found it hard to speak with calm; he could not keep his voice from breaking. "We said 'Good morning' to each other."

Merriweather smiled down at the knot of hair on the child's head.

"Who rescued you from the asylum, Ellie dear?" he asked.

The child trembled more violently.

"Come, come," urged Merriweather. "Tell the gentleman."

She tried to speak, failed, and then, with great eyes fixed on nothingness, said, in her queer, hollow voice:

"It was Mr. Merriweather rescued me from the asylum."

"And who nursed you, Ellie? Back to health?"

"Mr. Merriweather."

Tony saw the man's strong, white hand tighten on her thin arm; the jewelled fingers flashed. He saw the child wince, and he sat ready to spring. But Merriweather said kindly:

"Think again, dearie."

"*Mrs.* Merriweather!" The answer was almost a cry of pain.

"Right!" The little man beamed, but his grip did not relax. "And who is it you love—best in the world?"

Again the tone was psittacine: "Mr. and Mrs. Merriweather."

Merriweather released her. She swayed, caught herself, staggered to the door and disappeared.

"Gratitude," breathed her benefactor, softly nodding his white head with its cheery rubicund face. "You see. Touching.

"'The offices of nature, bond of childhood,
Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude.'

Rarest virtue in this selfish world."

Then he seemed to forget all about the child and embarked on a relation of a peculiarly abominable crime committed, years ago, by the Buzzard Gang on Welsh Mountain, under the leadership of Sebastian Vink. He drank as much as last night and no more. Promptly at ten o'clock, he tucked a brandy-bottle under one arm and, holding a steady candle with the other hand, saw Tony to his room.

This time Tony listened and heard the key skilfully turned simultaneously with the closing of the door. He heard Merriweather pass on, down the hall—heard him unlock, open and relock behind him the door that barred the passage.

Tony got into bed. He remembered the look of cold cruelty that he had seen flicker in the eyes of his host when Maria opposed him. Incredible, the supposition that this

little man could wring from that giantess the cry of terror and agony that had sounded through the house the night before! Would it be repeated to-night?

The prisoner lay awake long enough to assure himself that nothing new would happen. He rose early enough to hear Maria remove the evidences of his imprisonment. Between those two periods he rested undisturbed.

Three days and three nights passed in much this manner, without offering any clue to the ground-plan or purpose of the maze into which he had been so strangely led. There was no reference to his supposed identity; in spite of the elaborate warning, there were no more cries in the night.

Merriweather never went to bed altogether sober, but never showed at breakfast any tokens of the preceding evening's drink. At and after each dinner he talked incessantly, sometimes of his painting, but for the most part of Shakespeare, Buzzard and Vink. These three personalities and their works possessed for him an equal fascination. For the first he had a genuine love of the baser sort, coupled, as such literary lusts generally are, with a tenacious memory, and, like all

lusts, conceited. The deeds of the latter two he would relate, not with the relish of a criminal, nor yet with the more distasteful gusto of the sociologist, but rather as a man that, with very little more talent, might have written "Titus Andronicus."

He announced himself as socially acceptable in Leeds and Doncaster, at all the larger county-towns in fact, and was proud of it. A casual phrase or two showed that he had lived in Europe, travelled in the East and grown familiar with the Malay Archipelago; but he had later become an assiduous cultivator in the garden of his intellectual faults, and, though he might have been interesting upon strange countries and alien peoples, he preferred, like the loungers in a cross-roads' store, to gossip of a band of thieves and cut-throats, or else, as if he were a superannuated barnstormer, to mouth Shakespeare at whatever listeners he might command.

The fellow could evoke pictures. Tony found himself, now in his lonely rambles about the island-prison, again in his narrow bed o' nights, busying his imagination with the deeds of which Merriweather talked and envisaging the Buzzard desperadoes and their leader, Vink.

This ill-named Sebastian, Tony gathered, was unlike his barbarous followers in his savagery and unlike Merriweather in a genuine power of intellect. He accepted the pains of planning and left to coarser hands the hideous performance. Stained by a hundred crimes, he stood convicted of none. At one time, Tony would see him as if he were some sort of backwood preacher in a hell-fire sect; then he would stalk into the prisoner's thoughts a lying presentment with the gentle, near-sighted eyes of a book-worm, the stoop of the scholar; again, and most often, he blinked like a fat, brown spider in the centre of a fatal web. Curiosity about this traditional creature's appearance became an obsession, and yet there grew with it an odd fear of asking the simple questions necessary to satisfaction: as often as they came upon his tongue, some undefined superstition inhibited utterance.

Maria continued as inaccessible and uncommunicative as an Himalayan peak, of which she might, indeed, have been a physical model, built according to scale. The valleys at her feet were fruitful of enormous breakfasts, luncheons and dinners; her upper slopes were enveloped in the mists from smoked ham and

eggs fried in fat, from mashed potatoes and gravy, and from hot buckwheat-cakes sputtering beneath torrents of molasses; her crest out-topped knowledge.

Tony gathered that she had a single vice: she never missed a funeral. Shut away from all but the rarest and most occasional intercourse with the lonely district about her, she appeared to scent death on the far-journeying breeze, and thereupon, placing a small black bonnet on her massy head, would tramp, over any by-paths in any weathers, to be present at its sad and sordid sequel. She was gone upon such a pilgrimage a short while after Tony's arrival, and when she returned was less unsocial than he ever again saw her: she expressed the passing change by singing at her fireside an extraordinarily bilious Gospel-hymn, voiced in an abysmal bass and directed by an epic resolve of utterance, let the consequences be what they might.

Thus, then, these days. The morning was ushered in by neither newspaper nor reveille; the daylight bore no duties, the evening no release. Food, it appeared, was brought upon weekly expeditions to far-away farms behind the hills. No postman delivered letters, not a soul passed down the tow-path or was visible

on either shore. For Tony there was no more sign of outside life than if the inhabitants of this island were marooned instead on some uncharted reef of some unnavigated sea—excepting Merriweather's chatter, no more hint of the work and worry, the loves and losses, of the busy modern world than if he and his present companions had been miraculously moved backward to a time before such things began.

Save for his suspicions and his innate energy, this lethargic armistice might not have proved unpleasant to him. The less one has to do, the less one is inclined toward any doing; but this one's soul, having thus far worked its passage on the liner of life, had gained the uncomfortable habit of activity and, having in the past short while been surrounded by so much that was fearful and mysterious, could now scarce detect Merriweather pouring wine, or discover Maria broiling a chop, without seeing therein a sinister purpose.

"What the devil do they want to do to me? And why don't they do it?"

A hundred times a day, five hundred a night, he asked himself that double question. What was the plot to which he seemed essential, yet of which never a new word was

said? A gnawing desire to see again the mother that he had loved and, along with himself, educated, was nicely balanced by the fear of being seen again by Lottie, the problem, also, of just how deeply he had involved himself with the occult Army through the manner of his quitting it. Though he was well treated here, he was always conscious that the treatment inhered in some design as illicit and as perilous as it was obscure.

He played his part, the exceedingly difficult and distasteful part of a fool, but he felt, although he could not demonstrate it, that he was nearly always watched and knew, what was patent, that he was a prisoner. Merriweather, who never now used any name in addressing him, appeared to be waiting the propitious moment for some further step. Somehow, it was arranged that Tony did not soon again meet with Ellie alone; somehow, it happened that he became acquainted with little of the house beyond the great common-room and the narrow chamber in which he slept.

Once, as he went to breakfast, he stepped backward and tried the door that spanned the upper hallway: it was locked securely. That night he noticed that Merriweather, intent on

avoiding too certain suspicion, did not look into his guest's bedroom before surreptitiously fastening him there, and he thereupon resolved that, if ever he was permitted to go to bed alone, he would slip into the next room and investigate the house nocturnally.

Chance of another sort came, however, with the Spring, and the Spring came as Merriweather had predicted. There was a day of rain, warm and heavy, washing the landscape clean, followed by a day when the sun was hot and all the hills wet with new rivulets and waterfalls, and then a day when the skies were azure and the river indigo and all the countryside green. The world was alive, and Maria donned her black bonnet and went to a funeral.

"She has left us much to eat. Though cold," said Merriweather;

> "'What nearer debt in all humanity
> Than wife is to the husband?'

It is as well she has gone. There is something I shall want to talk to you about. This afternoon."

Eating, nevertheless, did not greatly concern Merriweather that day. Maria had not been five minutes gone, he had no sooner

swung back and locked the crude drawbridge, than he began to devote himself to drinking. Perhaps he was, as he declared, pouring libations to the young season; perhaps he sought counsel in the wine for the promised communication. That was a riddle that Tony was never to solve.

Merriweather had climbed to the brandy stage of his potations by noon. Half an hour later he went down the upper hallway with a bottle under one arm and a syphon in either hand, yet he managed to lock the door behind him. Tony's soaring expectations were not at once disappointed: his host failed to appear for luncheon.

The chief prisoner went in search of the lesser. He found her in a miserable cell at the end of the passage under the stairs.

Ellie was much as he had seen her last. Worse, he thought, she could not have been and lived. She was seated on an uncovered cot, her thin hands clasped over her thin knees, her big, dreary eyes fixed on the dirty wall.

"*I* didn't tell 'em nothin'": that was her greeting.

"But where have they been hiding you?"

"Nowheres. I been doin' my work. Same's always."

"Why didn't I see you?"

She shook an ignorant head.

Tony sat down on the cot beside her. "We're safe for a while. Mrs. Merriweather's gone to a funeral."

"I know."

"And Mr. Merriweather's upstairs, sick."

She looked at him. "You mean drunk?" she inquired listlessly.

"Well, I'm afraid so."

"He 'most always is when she goes to one o' them funerals. Not last time, 'cause he wasn't used to you then. He's used now." Some memory painted alarm on Ellie's eyes. "I wisht there'd not be no more o' them funerals."

"But this gives us our chance."

"How?" Her voice held nothing sanguine; it was all but uninterested.

"You wait and see."

"We kin't git off'n the island."

"Just you wait. I'm going to look around."

"'Tain't no use."

"I'll see about that. Are you all right?"

The meagre knot of hair nodded.

"Got something to eat?"

Ellie nodded again.

"Then wait here." Tony started toward the common-room. "But first I want you to tell me what you hadn't time to tell me the other day—about that cry in the night, you know. Who was it hurt Mrs. Merriweather?"

He had to coax her again; even there, with no fear of surprise, no fear of eavesdroppers, he had to coax her again, and then he could just catch her breath at his ear:

"It's *him!*"

"Merriweather?" Heard in other circumstances, the thing would have remained unbelievable; reflected on some days since, it had evoked the amused smile of incredulity. Heard in this situation, and in an awe-stricken whisper from this trembling little outcast, it frightened and sickened him. "In Heaven's name *how?*"

"I—I don't know. But it's him. I *know* it's him."

More she would not say. He left it at that.

He made another tour of the island, but returned from it as much a prisoner as ever. The search consumed hours, for it was directed by the thoroughness of despair; yet there was

no means of escape discoverable. The drawbridge was secure, its padlock tight, its chain heavy; there was no file to be found, nor materials from which to make one. He could not successfully chop the pole free with the axe that lay by the woodpile, because, as he vividly recalled, its full length only just reached across the narrowest portion of the rushing gap between the island and the shore. He looked for a tree light enough to be dragged, after felling, to the chasm, and long enough to span it: the only traces of such trees were some recently made stumps. Boat there was none; he was no swimmer, nor could the strongest, he believed, survive that howling flood.

The Spring twilight was falling when he came back to the inn. He tiptoed upstairs and explored the accessible rooms there: except for one furnished like his own and Maria's—which, with its broad bed, stood on the opposite side from his and close beside the intersecting door—they were all bare. He had been seeking he knew not what up here and, like most aimless seekers, he found nothing. Ellie he appealed to for tools in vain.

Then he had his inspiration:

Merriweather was indubitably armed, but

might be stupefied. At all events, the chance, if only for Ellie's sake, must be taken. Tony resolved to climb the roof and drop through the skylight in a temerarious endeavour to seize from the Little Man the key of the drawbridge.

CHAPTER VII

THE ROOF

BUT there were peremptory preliminaries.

A defenceless man setting out against a man armed owes those whom he leaves behind a plan for their safety in the likely event of his never coming back. Tony went again to the common-room.

Maria kept some paper there and a pencil, hanging by the fireplace, for her culinary memoranda. In the intervals of his quests, Tony had kept the fire alive, but, among the trash strayed forward from the kindling, he found something else he wanted : an envelope.

It had been used before; it was an old envelope addressed to Merriweather at a post-office box in Blunstonville; but it was of war-time manufacture : the gum was poor, and the recipient had opened it by forcing the flap. Tony, with a kitchen-knife, made shift to scratch out the old address and substituted this one :

OFFICER COMMANDING,
Detachment State Police,
Leeds, Penn'a.

Leeds, he knew, was the county town. There must be State police there. If he succeeded in his attack on Merriweather, the letter need not be sent. If he was killed in the enterprise, the letter might free Ellie and could not hurt him. If he was only wounded, it must still go forward, even though its summons restored him to the grip of the Army and betrayed his person to Lottie: the Army and Lottie would have to fight each other for possession, and he grimly reflected that, if he knew anything about Lottie, the ultimate chances were in her favour.

With the fewest possible words, he sketched the situation. He described Ellie's predicament, and then, the better to bait his lure, cited her to prove that there was, or would have been, on the island an unarmed man—it cost some sacrifice!—who, if not a deserter, had at least irregularly and perhaps fraudulently secured his discharge from the A.E.F. There was no signature.

He found Ellie in the falling shadows on the miserable cot.

"What have you been doing all this time?"

"Waitin'. You said to."

She might not have moved since he left her!

But there was now no time for praise of patience. Merriweather was probably fighting his way back toward sobriety, in preparation for the evening's regular debauch. Tony's ears were set for a sound from above; they expected momentarily the hail of Maria from the tow-path.

"Does Mr. Merriweather write letters?"

"Now'n then."

"How does he mail them?"

"Leaves 'em in the big room. First person 'at goes acrost, him er her, takes 'em along."

Divided between the desire for clarity and the pressing need for haste, Tony explained the second part of his plan. She was to take this letter which he now handed her and hide it so that she would always have it about her. When she saw some letters piled for posting, in the common-room, she was to pick out one addressed to a business-firm, steam that open upon her first opportunity, enclose Tony's letter and quickly re-seal Merriweather's, returning the latter, as soon as might be, to the place where she had found it.

"Can you read?"

"O, yes!" There was pride in the reply. "I spell out the words, when they ain't too long."

He instructed her to be sure that the enclosure was made in a business-letter, in some envelope addressed to a company. He rehearsed the forms; he went over his instructions again and again. It was a frail chance, but the only one save that which was about to lead him to the roof.

Ellie dully accepted it.

"But 'tain't no use. He'll find it out, somehow."

"Somehow? How?"

"I dunno. He always does. Anythin'."

Tony rose. He was listening for sounds of Merriweather, sounds of Maria.

"Well, we've got to try it, anyhow. Now I'm going to see if I can't get the bridge-key away from Merriweather."

But hands, the hands of a tiny skeleton, gripped his fingers.

"Don't!" she moaned. "Don't you try it, Mister!"

"Of course I will." He freed himself easily, and bestowed a pat of comfort. "Buck up, Ellie. What are you afraid of?"

"Somethin' awful."

"Why, he can't hurt *me*."

"You don't know him."

"And even if he could, there's this letter

for you. You can use that."

He saw her pinched face upturned to him in the now heavy twilight. Her tone was hollow, but her eyes were like a spaniel's.

"If I kin't git back to the 'Sylum 'cept by harm's comin' to you"—she spoke slowly and with the marks of mental effort—"then I'd ruther stay here an' stand it."

There was something damp on Tony's lashes. He bent hurriedly and kissed the pale, tremulous mouth of the child.

"Nonsense; I'm all right. We'll go away together. You'll come with *me*: no more island and no more 'Sylum for yours. Just wait here, quiet. You'll see."

He made for the door. As he came to the passage under the stairs, he looked back. A dim window was behind her, and her puny figure was silhouetted against it, her pipe-stem arms stretched out, the tiny hands opened in mute petition.

However, he had not an instant to lose. He hurried through the common-room and out of doors, found the ladder, placed it against the house, on the Doncaster County side, and thus made his way to the roof.

It was a peaked roof with an appalling pitch of moss-grown shingles interspersed with

patches of Delta slate; a series of tottering chimneys broke its topmost edge. He had scaled to it near the end farther from the skylight, in order to lessen the hazard of alarming Merriweather by any bang of the ladder against the eaves, and now his task was to climb to the ridge and work his way along that to the skylight. Once there, he would drop upon his enemy, even if the attack involved precipitating himself bodily through the obstructing glass.

He slipped off his boots, yoked them by their laces and hung them around his neck. Then, sprawling flat against the steep incline, he began to wriggle slowly upward with his belly, toes and fingers.

It was a perilous adventure. The early night was pitch black, and, though he knew that the moon would soon rise, he remembered that it was a full moon, which, if it helped him by displaying the dangers of his slow progress, would also advertise his presence, should some chance noise betray him. Maria might arrive at any moment: he was a snail on a garden-wall, and yet he must race against time.

The shingles were old and rotten; the yielding moss turned slippery so soon as he seized

it. Twice he thought himself slipping backward; the endless roar of the river became in his ears the roar of the still air as he shot through it to destruction; he was held by tearing blindly with clutching finger-nails and finding the slightest of handholds at spots where shingles had been blown away by long-forgotten storms.

Somehow, he reached the top. An outflung arm, groping like the vague antenna of a monster insect, touched nothingness and, descending, touched the peak. He hauled himself astride and, seeing a dim glow in the roof ahead of him, struggled toward it in much the manner in which he had crossed the drawbridge, centuries ago. A little later and he was looking down into Merriweather's room.

The place apparently ran the width of the house and a goodly portion of its length; as much of it as Tony could see was in keen contrast to all the rest of the inn. It was papered and carpeted in turkey-red; lamps of a dozen oriental countries and as many religions hung, unlighted, from the sloping ceiling. On the walls gilt-framed paintings jostled one another above the low divan. Tony could see several bookcases that must contain Shakespeariana. He could see an easel with a palette leaning

against its blank canvas and a maulstick propped at the side. He could note these things because of the light from a mediaeval seven-branch candlestick placed on a library-table in the centre of the room.

Beside that table, with the brandy-bottle two-thirds empty at his elbow, sat, in an old winged armchair, Martin F. T. Merriweather.

Tony was directly above. What he recognized was the fluffy white head and the jewelled white hands spread wide on a large volume held open by the figure's crossed knees. What he heard, through the thin glass, was Merriweather cooing :

> "Hist! Romeo, hist! O, for a falcon's voice
> To lure this tassel-gentle back again!
> Bondage is hoarse, and may not speak aloud;
> Else would I tear the cave where Echo lies,
> And make her airy tongue more hoarse than mine."

Alone with his liquor, the man was declaiming "Juliet" in his best small-town opera-house imitation of a woman's voice!

Tony chuckled. But Merriweather uncrossed his slim legs, and, beneath the book, a heavy Army automatic slid gently to the floor.

The soldier's fingers explored the skylight's rim. With prodigious prudence, he began to

drag himself around the framework. It was, of course, fastened from within, but he was in the half-hope that some warping would lend the means of raising it from the outside, when he was struck into sudden immobility by the twice-repeated hoot of a screech-owl from the shore.

Maria, on the tow-path, was hailing the inn.

CHAPTER VIII

TORTURE

MERRIWEATHER leaped instantly to a pair of surprisingly steady feet. He hopped out of the observer's vision.

Trying to order his panic to a plan, Tony flattened himself against the roof as he had flattened himself to the rubble of No-man's Land when star-shells threatened revelation to a scouting-party in France. Should he hurry toward the ladder to regain the house? To what purpose? The resumption of his fool's rôle disgusted every muscle that had retrieved its taste for the performance. Yesterday, caution enjoined that discovery take precedence of denunciation; to-night, the once again indulged instinct for physical exertion stopped caution's mouth. Before it could win to utterance, he became aware that it was indeed as if he were hiding from detection by the star-shells; he was, in fact, lying in what was worse than their fitful flashes; he was bathed in a steady radiance: the splendid disc

of a full moon had swung clear of the river-hills.

A door closed. Merriweather was trotting toward the drawbridge.

Tony raised a circumspect head. The dark blue heavens were full of stars. Peeping over the roof-crest, he could see his jailer's jaunty figure on its way to the windlass, could see the black bulk of Maria canting upward from the far side of the tow-path.

If Tony could see them, they might see him. Very well, he would hide by one of the chimneys. Perhaps the Merriweathers would assume that he had gone to bed and would lock his door without looking into the room behind it. When the Little Man resumed his drinking, there would thus be a fresh chance for the key. If, on the other hand, they came up after him, he would toss them back. Better: he would haul up the ladder, and then—for certainly there was no second ladder on the island—he would descend until he was shot down.

Hanging by his bleeding hands to the peak of the roof, his body against the side hidden from his jailers, Tony edged his way to the point at which the clear moonlight showed him the tip of the ladder, leaning against the

eaves. He had need of expedition, for the sound of dragging it upward must be coincident with the noise of the lowering of the drawbridge, yet he must proceed with the utmost care, or else the weight of the ladder would hurl him to the ground.

Directly above his head rose a narrow chimney. He crouched in its shadow and hung his boots over the peak of the roof. He stripped off his coat and trousers; tied the legs of the latter around the chimney; hitched one sleeve of the former to them, through the crotch; bound the other around his ankles and, thus precariously to the dubious support, wriggled, face downward, toward the eaves.

Could he reach the ladder? Would the clothes hold? Would the chimney? Would he be quick enough to time the up-pull with the descent of the draw?

It was all right—so far. He had even to wait a long second, with the blood pounding in his temples, before the grinding of the windlass on the other side of the house innocently signalled him. He hauled the ladder up and, at some risk of discovery, hooked it over the chimney. He was into his clothes again, and curled tight against that friendly stack of

bricks, before Maria raised the drawbridge that her husband had lowered for her.

Although she was as yet some distance from the house, Tony could hear her profound inquiry as to his whereabouts as clearly as if she were beside him.

"*Woo ist de yung zwil'l?*"

Merriweather answered in English. "Inside, I suppose."

They entered the inn.

Immediately there rose from it the sounds of consternation. Voices called him—"Sam! Sammy!"—voices rising from the conventional to the violent. Doors banged. Beneath his feet, furniture was dragged about. Merriweather, Maria and Ellie came on the lawn with lanterns in their hands and darted like so many great fireflies in and out among the trees, from side to side and from one end of the island to the other.

With confused shouts, and finally with timid reproaches on the part of the wife and raging replies from her husband, the search continued for a full thirty minutes that were for Tony as many hours. He lay cramped against the chimney. When the seekers drew near on one side of the inn, he half-circled his protection until he lay again with the chimney

between them and him. Below, at least two of the trio searched thoroughly; but they never once looked toward the roof. Their single assumption was that the fugitive wanted to leave the island: they did not contemplate his weakening his chances of escape by planting himself where, in fact, he was planted. Not suspecting the roof, they did not miss the ladder. At last, they foregathered, panting, some yards before the front door.

Maria suggested that, maybe, Tony could swim, after all.

"Shut up!" shouted Merriweather.

"Then," Maria sullenly grumbled, "he is *farsufa*."

"Drowned!" her husband repeated. "You damned idiot!" In a paroxysm of vexation, he balanced on his toes. The fugitive, risking a glance, saw him raise his clenched fists above his fluffy poll. "Go to bed!" he shrieked in a screeching falsetto. Then the head turned toward the cowering Ellie, and his whole manner changed. His tone became that of high command; but it still addressed itself to his wife: "Go to bed. And don't stir out of your room. Whatever happens. *I'll* finish this."

Ellie gave a little cry.

"You come upstairs with me," he said to her. "I want to talk to *you*."

He dragged her toward the house.

As one that is helpless instinctively looks upward for help, Ellie raised her great, round eyes. The silver moonlight fell upon her face. It was not frightened; only the memory of fear remained. Somehow, it struck Tony as even more than resigned: it was a face at once so aware of danger and so calm in the certitude of deliverance. She could not have seen him, but, afterward, he wondered if she could have seen Somebody Else: hers might have been the face of one of the Holy Innocents.

Then Maria lumbered after husband and captive. The door closed.

Even above the noise of the river and through the muffler of the roof, Tony's strained ears could hear Maria go to her own room and Merriweather slam the door across the upper hallway. If he was to try to save Ellie, the moment had come to face his jailer's automatic. With heart-breaking haste, he propelled himself toward that portion of the roof above Merriweather's studio.

As he drew near, a terrific scream that seemed to shatter the glass rose from below it.

He had but a yard more to go along the roof.

Then he would plunge, stockinged feet foremost, through the skylight. In order to take a leap, if possible, upon Merriweather, he would look but once before the jump.

He looked.

So far as he could see, the room was empty.

CHAPTER IX

THE CLICK OF A LATCH

FROM the seven-armed candlestick, two or three guttering stumps of tapers still cast a wavering light around them. It fell on the red walls and carpet, was tossed back and forth among the gilt picture frames, blunted by the dull brass of the oriental lamps and reflected from the blank canvas on the easel. The library table bore what must be the copy of "Romeo and Juliet," open at the page its owner had been reading when the screech-owl summons hailed him to the hunt. He had said that he was returning here; Tony had heard him come; the shriek of the tortured child had sounded through these very panes of glass: yet now, only a few seconds afterward, no life was discernible.

Needless, then, the planned plunge; need for haste there must remain, but need, too, for silence: the value of Tony's attack upon an armed enemy depended wholly on there being no warning. His fingers found the

warping in the frame, which he had sought before. He thrust them in.

The pinch was dire, but his strength prevailed: the skylight gave and, as he rose to his uncertain feet, rose after him. If Merriweather stood somewhere out of sight below, Tony, within a few seconds now, would be a dead man. He swung himself over the opened cavity and dropped softly on the deep nap of the rich rug.

The portions of the room that he had been unable to see from the roof merely repeated the style and features that he had observed, and the place was indeed empty. He had just made sure of that when a faint breeze from the opened skylight blew out the last of the candles.

At first, this sudden darkness in a strange room bewildered him. The moonlight from overhead, when his eyes could take account of it, only added to his confusion. He blundered against the table, all but tripped over a divan. He was seeking the door blindly when a queer sound gave him the direction. Into the hollow silence of the house came the noise of an inert something being dragged over flooring, and then a low bumping as if a sack of grain were being hauled down the stairs.

Instantly, Tony was in the upper passage and creeping rapidly forward.

A latch clicked. All sounds ceased. The hallway seemed endless.

Coherent thought had deserted Tony; his brain was suspended over the pit of action; but through his brain, as he slunk ahead, on his stockinged feet, his extended arms touching the wall, there flashed disconnected pictures, hitherto unregarded pages torn from the bloody legends that Merriweather delighted in. The rude brutality of the Abe Buzzard Gang; its moulding to refined and more profitable cruelties by the unspeakable Sebastian Vink, that shadowy figure and cunning brain prolific to plan, too crafty to appear—lonely farmsteads robbed, their denizens not murdered by any means that would leave evidence behind, but roasted at their own hearths and then the house burned over them—an ore-mine paymaster forced by pincers tearing at his vitals to write a false confession of suicide, and thereupon thrown to death over the ore-dump: the faces of these horrid fancies peopled the dark until Tony reached the hall's intersecting doorway.

The door stood ajar. He pushed it stealthily. The remainder of the passage was

lighted from the common-room below, and into the vacant vast of that apartment Tony swiftly descended.

It was much as usual: the searchers' lamps had been left unextinguished on the dining-table, lighting the stairs and the middle of the room, but through the unguarded windows on the side toward the lawn the moonlight poured, casting sharp facsimiles of the frames, like those of prison-bars, on the immaculate flooring. The only sound was the stifled sound of the river and the loud, emotionless ticking of the grandfather's clock in the corner.

Tony ran on light feet to a window. There was nothing on the lawn but the twisted shadows of the trees, which lay in tortured outline like scenery for some gigantic stage cut out of black cloth and left about by a mad director.

Tony remembered that click of a latch heard in the passage. He ran a-tiptoe to the door under the stairs. He had carefully left it open after passing through it from his talk with Ellie. Now it was closed and locked.

Should he risk the noise of forcing it? He must. He put out his hands——

The tablecloth flapped in a galloping

draught; one of the lanterns tumbled to the floor. Another door had opened: the front door.

"Stand where you are!"

Tony turned and faced Merriweather and the automatic.

CHAPTER X

THE STOLEN SON

But it was a new Merriweather. It was even a mighty change from the malevolent creature that, under the slow urge of a cold debauch, could delight in child-torture.

The little man was galvanized. Purpose, clearly realized and fully determined, both stiffened him and vibrated through him. His blue eyes had turned cold, his mouth was pinched, his fluffy head thrust itself forward. The rings glittered in the lamplight on his fair hand that held the pistol, but the hand was steady; along the butt, the clenched knuckles of the last two fingers were tightened to the likeness of a marble-player's "white-allies"; the middle finger curled around the hair-trigger; the long index-finger pointed beside the barrel directly at Tony's heart.

"It's 'Good-night' now!" thought Tony, and marvelled at his high serenity of spirit.

Only the dining-table separated them.

For a full second, there was no sound except

the fall of ashes in the fire, the ticking of the clock and the roar of the river outside. Tony stood rigidly at attention; his mouth was parched; his head was hot, his hands icy cold. Something hummed in his temples. He considered himself a dead man; but he could still win what advantage there lay in the first word of the plainly impending colloquy, and that he seized:

"Don't be a fool, Merriweather: put down that gun."

He was surprised at the scornful note that his voice attained; it was, he felt, admirable. Neither, however, by syllable nor movement, did the little man respond.

"You're drunk, Merriweather; that's what's the matter with you."

Nobody was ever more sober than Merriweather. He made no sound—he made no motion; but he radiated fatal energy as radium sends forth heat.

Tony kept it up. He tried to bully:

"Where's Ellie?"

Then Merriweather spoke slowly, along the barrel of the automatic:

"I have sent her ashore. With money to take her back to the asylum. I have no place for spies in my house."

His breath whistled through his teeth at the end of every sentence; it was a chill sound. Nevertheless, Tony was making him talk, and every delay seemed so much postponement of extinction.

"I don't believe you," said Tony.

Merriweather shrugged his shoulders.

"There is a bottle on the middle window-sill to your right. With glasses. Get it. Put it on the table. Pour me a drink."

Tony never obeyed a command with more alacrity; but a steadily pointing finger followed his acquiescence. It pointed all the while that Merriweather tossed the liberal dram of raw spirits, so hopefully provided, down his thin throat.

"I am not drunk," he presently resumed. "I will not get drunk. Nothing could make me drunk—now. But I am tired holding this pistol this way. Keep the table between us. And fold your arms."

Tony folded them.

"Tight," commanded Merriweather.

Tony tightened them.

"That is better." Merriweather sat down, resting his pistol-arm on the table. "Now I shall tell you who you really are."

Tony, all hope abandoned, threw back his head and laughed.

"What? Again?"

"Once and for all."

"Look here——" began Tony; he was about to emphasize his words with a gesture.

The pistol leaped up. It followed him.

"Keep your arms folded!"

"All right," said Tony. ("I'm as good as gone," he assured himself.) "All right," he said again aloud. "All I want to tell you is: I know mighty well who I am!"

He expected amazement. It was all to be his.

Merriweather nodded. "*I know you do.*"

"Then you took my letter from Ellie?"

"Of course."

"I'll bet you had to half-kill her to get it, you little rat!"

"*Half*-kill her?" Merriweather smiled. "Perhaps. The point is, I have it. I know you know who you are. Who are you?"

Tony remembered that he had not given his name in the ill-fated letter; he had argued that it must come out, but that there was no use giving Lottie too great a handicap. He argued much thus now.

"Come—come," Merriweather insisted. "I've guessed for days that you were sane enough. Tell the truth."

"William Webster," lied Tony, and wondered why he should take the trouble.

"Where is your home?"

"Ellensburg, Washington." He thought he had heard of such a place.

"Parents?"

"Dead." Tony had had enough of false relatives in the flesh.

Merriweather reflected. "Of course, if you had the courage—but you haven't! So you know who you are, eh? Now, listen while I tell you who it was you were going to be."

"Suit yourself," said Tony. "This seems to be your party. But will it take long?"

"You may sit down." Tony sat. "You are safer so. Did you ever hear of the Keppel case?"

So that was it: the Keppel case! Tony wondered how Merriweather—how Tony—could have any part in that long unsolved and now almost forgotten mystery. Almost forgotten, but, years ago—about 1899, wasn't it?—the Keppel case had owned a celebrity com-

mensurate with the state in which it was so rapidly enacted.

"Never heard of it," said Tony.

Without relaxation of his watchfulness, Merriweather embarked upon the history of the Keppel kidnapping:

It *was* in 1899: Tony was right. Georgie, the three years' old son of George W. Keppel, widower, a pecunious banker of Leeds, Pa., was playing, according to his summer-day habit, on the wide lawn of his father's suburban house, near the hedge beside the Blunstonville turnpike. He was last seen there by his nurse, who left him, at a quarter-mile's distance, to talk with her sweetheart, the driver of the grocer's delivery-wagon. Later, these two thought that, while they courted, another wagon, a covered wagon, such as the local farmers commonly drove to market, passed slowly in the direction of Blunstonville and stopped near the spot where Georgie was at play, while a man descended to repair some mishap to the harness. What lovers, however, could be expected to be observant? About fifteen minutes thereafter, the nurse sought Georgie: he was gone.

Nor was he, from that day to this, seen again.

A vain hue and cry succeeded. Rewards were offered for the boy's return, for the kidnappers' arrest: the boy with curling fair hair and brown eyes wide apart, the man unfortunately indescribable.

So much Tony, though years after the event, of course, had heard before. Of what followed he had forgotten gossip's details; but Merriweather, in whistling periods, supplied it all:

It was the common story of parental anguish torn between the offers of body-thieves pursuing cruelty and the promises of self-sufficient policemen covetous of pay. Within a week of the kidnapping, the elder Keppel received a letter pledging Georgie's return for $25,000, if that sum were paid in gold and delivered at a certain spot and time, but adding that Keppel himself, unaccompanied and not followed, must bear the money. His lawyers—"the chief was Abraham Hilegas," said Merriweather, "a friend of mine"—persuaded him to have detectives follow to the rendezvous—and nothing happened. There came a second letter, enclosing a piece of Georgie's dress; the kidnappers now increased their demands, declared a knowledge of Keppel's double-dealing and threatened

death to Georgie if detectives were again employed. The father again, though more cautiously, used the detectives, and again without result.

"You know your piece by heart, don't you?" jeered Tony.

Merriweather continued:

In a third letter, the ransom was reduced to $10,000. It must be brought by Keppel in person to a lonely place near Americus, at 2 a.m. of a certain day, and left there; twenty minutes afterwards, Georgie, alive and well, would be found somewhere on a doorstep near by; but the least token of ill-faith on the part of the father would this time infallibly entail the death of the child.

Now it was the lawyer Hilegas who interfered on his own responsibility. He sent detectives to Americus, although Keppel faithfully kept his part of the bargain near Leeds.

"The boy wasn't found in Americus," said Merriweather.

Tony maintained his air of indifference.

"No?"

"No, but a few days later, Mr. Keppel got another letter. Postmarked 'Harrisburg.' It said that the detectives had been detected.

That Georgie was killed according to promise. That his body would be found buried. Under a certain tree. On a certain island. In this river."

CHAPTER XI

ONE MASK OFF

MERRIWEATHER had been speaking of this crime not in that character of an Elizabethan dramatist in which he had been wont to narrate his histories of the Welsh Mountain cutthroats. There had been no Shakespearian allusions. He spoke with the succinct clarity and directness of a business-man describing a stroke of trade. As he reached the climax, his sentences grew shorter, the sharp intakings of his breath were nearer together.

Tony looked at the rafters, but not to evade Merriweather's unwavering eyes.

"I suppose it was this island?" he scoffed.

"Have you ever noticed the old black oak?" asked Merriweather. "At the downstream end?"

Tony cleared his throat.

"I think I have."

"I wasn't living here at the time," said Merriweather. "Nobody was. Although this property has been long in my family. Generations."

"They looked?"

"And found a body. A child's. It was mutilated. Also half the dress had been torn away. But the remaining half was enough. Georgie's."

A drop of sweat ran down Tony's forehead. It trickled through an eyebrow and fell on the cheek below. It was cold.

But this was not fear. It was loathing of what must have happened, all those years ago, to some child even more defenceless than the wretched Ellie, and of the manner of its present telling. "*I'm* as good as gone," he repeated to himself. He could have broken this diminutive creature, this jackal, unarmed, across his knees; being armed, the thing would assuredly kill him. What gallantry possessed him he now therefore recognized.

It was the sublime disdain of despair; it was the contempt of the means of death that the immortal spirit wins only when the mortal body has repelled hope; the lofty welcome of the worst that will neglect no incredible opportunity, but has no expectation and yields no jot of pride. It was the force that his college "Universal History" had dimly glimpsed as ruling the French aristocrats awaiting the Convention's tumbrils. And it was a princely intoxication.

"Well," he demanded as Merriweather paused, "is that all you've got to say?"

"No."

And Merriweather went on:

Some people thought that the kidnappers had killed some other child; others suspected that a fresh grave had been robbed to fill this which was fresher; most were content that Georgie's body had indeed been found. A year thereafter, the father married his widowed housekeeper, Mrs. Florin. There was no issue of this union, but the housekeeper had a small daughter, Anna, born to her previous husband, and to Anna the father of Georgie became attached. He soon died, leaving a will under which his widow, and after her this girl, would receive the income from the bulk of a million-dollar estate. The whole of it was to go to the survivor after twenty-one years had passed from the date of Georgie's birth, provided that, within this period, no evidence was discovered to shake the identification of the little body found on the island. None was found, although some swindlers and many monomaniacs had attempted it.

"The will," said Merriweather slowly, "ruled that, if anything should upset the

identification—if some miracle should produce Georgie——"

"Well?" asked Tony.

"The banker never gave up hope. They never do."

"So then?"

"Except for certain bequests to the widow and her daughter—the entire fortune was to go to the recovered son. Barring, of course, Mrs. Keppel's dower."

The speaker's gaze had remained riveted on Tony; Tony's remained riveted on the rafters.

"And what about the kidnappers?"

"To-day. The statute of limitations. It would let them go free."

Tony's gaze descended slowly to that of his captor. Comprehension was reaching its flood.

"Who were they, Merriweather?" he asked.

Merriweather raised his pistol. "Sebastian Vink and the Abe Buzzard gang. I have spoken of them before."

Before! Fifty of his stories crowded, simultaneously, the stage of Tony's consciousness. His own envisagements jostled one another from the footlights to the back-

drop. And yet, somehow, not one of them all altered his mood.

"You certainly *have* spoken of them before. Any of them left?"

"A few of the old ones. People say."

"Must be a healthy trade."

"And several of the newer generation still——"

"At large. Well, Mr. Merriweather, or Buzzard, or Vink, you seem to have almost as many names as I have. But that doesn't matter. Here's what you want to know: Do I get you? Old top, I do."

For it was plain enough now: to search the shellshock wards for a case of irrecoverable identity in a soldier roughly answering the requisite description; to take this patient away, leaving a false name and a false address; gradually to shift from the memory of these; to implant then a belief in the victim's own mind——

"I was to have been the 'fair-haired boy.'"

"Exactly."

Tony regarded his captor. The change in the man's expression was manifestly only a development of potentialities that had always been there; so brief, in the plastic type of face, is the journey from innocence to depravity.

"I expected that," said Tony.

Until a minute ago, he had expected nothing of the sort, but he wanted to annoy Merriweather—to drive him to anger, and so to die.

It availed nothing. Tony's phrases had been almost as fatal to its users as the phrase "I told you so"; but Merriweather only nodded. The ex-service man had momentarily forgotten his lie about a home in Washington; Merriweather remembered and believed.

"Did you?"

"The lost che-ild brought up on the Welsh Mountain as What's-his-name's—Swope's—son, but taught to remember 'earlier and brighter days.' That stuff: 'I dreamed that I dwelt in marble halls!'"

"For $500,000," said Merriweather.

"Wait a minute: I thought you mentioned a million."

Merriweather's once rosebud mouth twisted into a sardonic smile. "I should want my salary to date. Before I left the country."

"And a month's pay in advance in lieu of notice. But what would identify me?"

"Your memories. My confession."

"Lots of people would confess anything for half a million."

"Then my handwriting. I have changed it, since, for safety. But it is that of the first notes to Keppel, really. Besides, I am known in the community. Respected." A touch of the old small-town social vanity raised his chin. "Received by the best people. In spite of my *mésalliance*. Friend of the Florins. Imagine: conscience-smitten gentleman confesses grievous ancient fault."

"The fools aren't all dead yet: it might have worked."

"If you knew the people involved as I am privileged to know them—you would say it could not have failed."

"Only why did you hold off so long from telling me my part?"

"Why," countered Merriweather, "did you pretend to believe I was your father? Why did you come along with me?"

"That's easy: there were reasons why I wanted to disappear."

"Well, then"—Merriweather, holding the pistol ready, was a figure of frankness—"I began to doubt your loss of identity. When you wanted to leave the train. It was necessary to make sure of you."

"You mean to-day's doings were a trap?"

"A part of them."

There was a long pause. The clock ticked noisily, the river's muffled roar climbed to the windows. From jibing at his captor, Tony had hoped that a prolongation of the talk might weaken watchfulness, but that hope proved vain. In this horrid caricature of his former self, the Little Man had sat, and was still sitting, steady, alert, the pistol ever prepared for instantaneous employment. The story was told; Tony grew impatient of life.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Well?" echoed Merriweather. He, at all events, was unhurried.

"Let's wind it up," said Tony.

Merriweather's outward watchfulness plunged upon mental introspection; his brows knit. "There is just one chance for you. I said you hadn't the courage. *Have* you?"

"Oh!" Tony was being offered the opportunity of doing with an enlightened mind what it had been hoped he might be made to do with memory dark. The corners of his mouth drew in upon his indignation. "I've got the courage to let you shoot me," he said.

Merriweather raised the pistol. "I'm asking you to take half a million." His breath

whistled through his teeth. "Or give your life."

Tony's caution told him to practice acquiescence in order to betray this fellow in some place public and secure; but the splendid scorn, the high intoxication, had risen again to his head as the pistol rose in Merriweather's strong, ringed fingers.

"'Gridley, you may fire when ready!'" Tony mocked.

Merriweather leaped to his feet. His right arm kept the automatic levelled, but all the rest of him trembled with rage—with rage and, Tony at once understood, with disappointment. The man faced the ruin of a scheme on which he must have staked his all; he was called upon to kill the goose that could, but would not, lay golden eggs. Save for his ever pointing arm, his frame was contorted. His face twisted like that of one in sharp and sudden physical pain. He stormed at Tony.

"You fool! You fool! You fool!"

In what far recess of soul was now the Shakespeare-lover? The amateur painter? The cooing Juliet? There was nothing of the barnstormer left. His speech came straight from his heart, and it was blasphemously sincere. In a sewer-rush of imprecation, he

mixed the obscenities of city stews with the crimson threats of the Welsh Mountain banditti.

"If I were big enough, I'd tear your tongue out!"

Tony waited a bullet.

"If I had you tied, I'd use a hot poker on you till—— Ah!" The creature's face went lurid with a frightful grin. "Maria!" he called, without a turn of the fluffy head. "Maria! Come down here. I've got him. Come down here and tie him up!"

CHAPTER XII

THE BUZZARD WAY

TORTURE! Tony felt very white.

Merriweather's cry evoked a responsive movement overhead. Ordered to her couch, Maria's obedience must have ceased when she closed her bedroom door: her heavy steps, now immediately audible, were those of feet still shod.

Tony winced.

"You're crazy!" he said, and he hated his voice for its thickness.

"You will see whether I am," said Merriweather. "You will wish I were."

He had changed to an appalling calm. He was clear. Tony understood: the man had done this thing before.

"Don't you know——" began Tony. His tongue was thick; he had to start all over again: "Even if you made me say 'Yes' now, don't you know I'd give you away the minute you got me into court to claim the money?"

"We shall meet that difficulty when we come to it," said Merriweather.

Maria lumbered down the stairs.

"Tie him up, my dear," said her husband.

Her icy face was as expressionless as ever. She advanced upon him from across the room with heavy certitude.

It was time to die. Tony flung himself upon her. He would fight and force a shot and escape the heated irons. He launched his mightiest blow at her determined jaw.

The blow never reached her. She caught his wrist in a huge palm. She enveloped him. He was a struggling child in her hippopotamic embrace.

"*De shdrik ist all,*" her bass voice announced. She might have been saying that the supply of coffee, instead of rope, was exhausted. "I besser hold him. It's no *alend.*"

It was indeed no trouble. Locking his arms behind him, she all but disregarded Tony's struggles. He shrieked at Merriweather; he dared the man to shoot: Merriweather stirred the fire and laid two pokers in its flames.

"Take off his shoes, Maria."

She laid Tony, like a doll, on the floor and planted one huge knee on his chest. He

rained blows as soon as she released his hands, but his blows had no more effect than if her body were a feather-bed. He kicked her in the face; she caught the swinging foot, broke the boot-laces and bared it of boot and stocking. She repeated the process with the other foot.

"All garish'd," she said.

The fire crackled, the clock ticked, the minutes passed. . . .

She held him helpless.

The minutes dragged. . . .

"It's no use," Tony swore; "I'll only blow on you the first chance I get."

"Hold his feet," said Merriweather.

He was coming forward with one brightly glowing poker in his jewelled hand.

Tony shut his eyes. His flesh crawled; his toes curled up like so many worms. . . .

And then he heard—music.

Oh, of course he was mad at last; but he really did seem to hear music. He heard something like an accordion and a rich baritone voice singing to an incredible dance-tune:

"'Oh, where is my wandering boy to-night;
Where is my wandering boy?'"

There was a crash.

Tony looked up. Merriweather, mouth gaping, face grey, had flung the poker back into the fire.

"It's—it's——"

He ran to the table, seized the brandy bottle and tossed it after the poker. It broke there; the flames leaped high in a great blue sheet.

Tony leaped, too. For Maria had released him. He leaped at Merriweather.

But Merriweather was darting through the door. He was around the corner of the inn before Tony had passed its threshold. He was standing in abrupt petrifaction beside the windlass when Tony came upon him.

And Tony stood petrified, too.

The full moon bathed the hillside and tow-path in what was almost daylight, and, against the background of silver trees, on a stage of shining metal, the thin, lithe figure of an agile old man—flying grey hair, and huge black goggles astride his delicately aquiline nose—to the music of a now lifted, now lowered accordion in his own hands, under his own flying fingers, swayed, pirouetted and kicked with all the vigour of youth and all the grace and more than the joy of a première *danseuse* at the opera.

"*Sha Gott!*" Back of Tony, Maria's bass flattened to a terrified whisper. "*Sha Gott, it ist de Blind Mon!*"

CHAPTER XIII

THE BLIND MAN

For second-like hours, it seemed to the dumbfounded Tony that the rushing river at his feet and the whirling figure across it were the only living things under the moon. After her gasp of recognition, Maria stood stricken, a gross Medusa in stone; beside her, Merriweather was as rigid as a colonel in a tableau, his right hand outstretched, vainly commanding her attention to something that he could not utter and that, had he uttered it, she could not hear. Thus, at the island's edge, immobility and silence; beyond it turmoil: the water churned and rumbled at the spectators' feet and, across it—the scream of his accordion and the pitch of his wailing voice surmounting the clamour of the millrace—the mad visitor pursued his *dance macabre*.

Then, abruptly and on the most piercing

note of all, the music ceased. The thin legs rested. With batlike arms, one of which ended in a long cane, the stranger began to explore the empty air before him.

"Cousin!" he cried in a piping voice.

Without a movement of her stony head, Maria's bulging eyes sought Merriweather. He dragged a tremulous finger to his lips.

"My dear cousin," pursued the Blind Man, "you are there, across the water. I can feel your presence. 'Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.'" He smiled; in the calcium-light of the moon, Tony could see him smile. "I am here at last. You are glad, aren't you? Come, then; lower the bridge!"

With a visible shudder, Merriweather would have surrendered, but when caution proved a craven, fear commanded: he tried to speak; Tony noted the contraction of his throat—no words came. The little man made a hopeless gesture, and Maria lumbered toward the windlass and looked to him for orders.

The visitor, tapping before him with the uncertain cane of the sightless, approached a step nearer to the edge of the canal. There was a gleam in Merriweather's eyes as if he

hoped that a second step might hurl the newcomer into the water; but his visitor paused on the brink of death and sang out again:

"Not glad to see me? Don't tell me that. Surely you wouldn't send me back to my inquisitive friends. *How is your nephew, dear cousin?*"

Merriweather gripped his wife's arm.

"How did he get here? How does he know? We've got to let him over. Lower away!"

Tony, as the great pole creaked downwards to become a precarious bridge, was in two minds as to what course to pursue. Should he abandon caution and try a dash across? That would be courting death. On the other hand, to remain would doubtless be to pass from frying-pan to fire; for all Merriweather's fear of him, this blind cross must be a member of whatever flock it was that Merriweather headed; there would now be three, instead of two, against one. Yet there was Ellie; if she lay dead in the old grave at the foot of the oak, Tony must get the proofs of it; if she was held captive in some corner of the island, he must rescue her. He had to wait.

With fascinated horror, he watched the

Blind Man. Through a moonlight clear as noon, he was feeling his way with ebony-stick. Cautiously he tapped to the now lowered pole. He placed one foot on it, then the other. Could a sightless being ever survive that perilous passage? Head up-raised, chin out-thrust, goggled eyes buoyed, he tapped along the narrow bridge with an infinitely delicate skill. The water roared beneath, the foam splashed his cloak, but his feet never wavered: he reached the island-shore and, with wide-flung bat-like arms, came forward toward his rooted hosts.

"At last!" he cried. There escaped him a thin laugh of high content. "A long journey, but it is safely ended. Come, cousin: your hand."

As if hypnotized, Merriweather obeyed, and Tony saw the Blind Man's talons close. Quickly and tightly, the stranger drew Merriweather to him; and his thin nostrils sniffed like a terrier's.

At once his manner changed. His voice hardened, his body became stiff.

"Drink! At it again. I thought so." His voice had vaulted to indignation; now it reached the whine of the zealot. "Still a

slave to the Devil of Rum. That is what has brought all this about! Very well; an awakened nation is driving that demon from its dominions: we will drive it from this island. We will begin now. Come."

He himself seemed possessed of some demon —a restless demon of activity and flawless intuition. His constantly moving stick touched Tony.

"Ah, there you are, little stranger."

He beckoned, and Tony, his muscles distancing all realization of their action, approached. The stick was instantly hitched over the thin arm, and the freed fingers explored, with canny, clammy touches, the boy's sweating face. Over lips and nose and ears, from revolted feature to feature they passed.

"I understand," said the Blind Man; he was addressing Merriweather. "So this is your nephew." The fingers passed to chest and arm. "A nice, husky boy!"

Merriweather was stirred from his immobility.

"Let's discuss him later. Maria,"—the venom of disappointment was spilled where there was safety in spilling it—"you elephant, pull up the bridge!"

She cranked the wheel, the muscles of her bared arms hugely swelling. The bridge swayed through the night air and back into its niche. Tony saw Merriweather shiver.

"What a breath! What a breath!" the Blind Man was saying. He shook his long grey hair. "All our dear land has purged itself of rum—and you call yourself an American! Think of your poor wife! Think of this dependent nephew!" He spoke in Maria's direction. "We must cure him of this!"

With an iron pressure of his fingers on Merriweather's arm, he directed him toward the house and thither, the woman bringing up the rear, the strange quartette proceeded. Presently, the big door closed them in, and the new guest, tapping his way to the table, stood beside it.

"Maria, dear," he said, "you might prepare me a cup of your good coffee and bring me a few slices of your excellent home-made bread: I've come a great way to pay you this long-delayed visit, but if I rid your place of the devil of alcohol I shall have been well repaid."

Merriweather, sober enough now, shot him

a single vindictive glance; but it was immediately replaced by an utterly cowed expression. A single whisky-glass remained on the big table; he tried to whisk it away—the Blind Man's ears were as sharp as his feet were agile.

"Those tiny glasses—each large enough to hold hell! Give me that one."

He shattered it on the floor. Maria was busied at the fire; Merriweather stooped to brush up the broken glass. The Blind Man drew Tony to him, whispered, pushed him away.

Had he spoken? It seemed to Tony that, rather than hearing, he felt the words in a chilly breath upon his cheek:

"I want a chance to talk with you!"

Almost immediately, the opportunity arrived. Merriweather carried out the dustpan with the bits of broken glass in it; his wife went on with her preparations for the guest's refreshment. The fact that his captors were in evident terror of the newcomer gave Tony hope.

"I am a poor blind man and friendless." The unpleasant figure's voice was still a whisper, but it was a whimper, too. "Never-

theless, perhaps I can help you. You need help, don't you, boy?"

Tony gasped. "You bet I do!"

"Hump. They've gone as far as that! Well, I am just a poor relative that they'd like to disown, but I think they are afraid of me." He squeezed his confidant's arm in a vice. "They *were* afraid of me, weren't they?"

Before Tony's memory flashed the picture of Merriweather's face as he dropped the poker: "I'll tell the world they *were!*"

"That's good." The Blind Man was gratified; he rubbed his hands together; he smiled, and his smile was not pleasant to meditate upon. "And you? You don't seem fond of your new uncle?"

"What do *you* know about this uncle-business?" asked Tony.

"Give me twenty-four hours," whispered the Blind Man. "I am still helpless; my eyes are a handicap. But give me twenty-four hours. Do nothing for just so long." His fingers returned to their hold; it made the boy wince. "Understand?"

"Sure I do."

"Ah, Maria!" The Blind Man's ears had

caught the faint sound of her turning from the fire, his nose seized the aroma of the coffee. "That's the fine smell—no rotten alcohol in that!" His reaching fingers touched the cup. "Ah, it is too full. Drink a little off the top, Maria, dear."

She glowered at him, but obeyed.

"You did it?" he pursued. "She did it, boy?"

"Yes," said Tony. It was clear that the stranger was taking no chances with poison or drug in this house of his accommodation.

"And now the bread, Maria. So. Just take a bite, my dear. The Arab way: we break bread together. She did it, boy? Thank you. Thank you, Maria."

Tony's glance strayed toward the stairs. At their foot, in the shadows that were a door, stood Merriweather. Tony thought of Ellie standing in the same spot on the night of his arrival. He half expected now to see her white, scared face; but Merriweather was beckoning.

Should the beckoning be obeyed? There was something sinister about the Blind Man, but it was clear that he mistrusted his entertainers and that they feared him. Murder—torture: impossible while there was in the

house a man that they feared. Tony crossed the room and was drawn well into the hallway.

"You're going to do what I asked?" inquired Merriweather. "You're beginning to see reason?"

The boy could hardly credit the question. "You mean to say you're still at that?"

"'Ungracious mouth!'" Merriweather expostulated. "We only gave you a chance. Tried to restore your sense of logic. You would have sore feet now, if——"

Tony let him have it: "If your blind cousin hadn't turned up!"

"Sh-h!" Merriweather wanted no noise. "A violent character, that—very violent. I fear him. A little——" The host of the Cross Keys Tavern tapped his head significantly.

Was it true? In all this antic house, nothing more fantastic than the Blind Man had as yet appeared; but there was about the stranger a determination which achieved its ends!

"So you want me to go through with your scheme?" he asked.

Merriweather's face had darkened. "I want you to think twice before you risk your life again."

From the next room came the sound of the

accordion and the voice of the Blind Man above it:

"Where is my wandering boy to-night?
Oh, where is my wandering boy?"

Was it a warning?

Tony would rely on the caution lately whispered him. "I'll tell you what," he said. "I *will* think the thing over. I'll want twenty-four hours. You can't expect me to ask less."

"Very well." Merriweather's voice balanced between doubt and relief, but it won to a threat. "Here's the chance of a lifetime. 'Put money in thy purse': all the money you can ever wish. Your intelligence—appearance—everything in your favour: you can't lose. It is as sure——" Now that he was seeing light again, he could seek with more serenity for apt quotations. "As sure as——"

"As sure as that you killed Ellie!" laughed Tony.

Merriweather laughed, too. "'Oh, matter and impertinency mixed!'"

"Well," said Tony, "I'll go this far now: if I say 'Yes' to-morrow night at this time and in this hall, I'll not back out; I'll go

through with it. Now I'm going to bed."

It was the practical tongue of Merriweather's brain that answered, and this was all finality: "Very well. But remember one thing: you've *got* to go through with it—or die. Remember that—and good-night to you!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE OTHER HEIR

MORNING came clear and cold and unforebodding. Tony rose early, but not so early as to precede the Blind Man, who sat, long and grey and thin, in the ground-floor living-room precisely as if he had never stirred all night. There was the hint of a stealthy movement as the boy descended the stairs, but, descended, Tony found the stranger apparently asleep.

Tony coughed.

"Good morning," said the man in the chair.

"Aren't they up?"

"I think they were a little tired last night and are probably oversleeping a bit this morning." The key lowered. "Trust me. I shall be of use to you yet."

The boy came close to him and again was caught in the gripping fingers. "Then try to find out what happened to Ellie."

"Ellie?"

Tony could no longer contain his difficulties. A swift deluge poured out the story of the preceding evening up to the moment before the Blind Man's advent. Facts and fancies, things seen and things only feared, bounced upon the rushing surface. At one of them the auditor seized.

"The Keppel heir? So they've just told you. I guessed it was that. You refused?"

"Sure I did."

"How much did they offer?"

"We were to go fifty-fifty. I don't know what *I* was to do once the estate was handed over, but Merriweather was going to beat it."

The Blind Man's mouth tightened. Always thin, it dwindled now to a mere line. "He was going away?"

"That's what he said. But about Ellie ——"

"Yes, yes; you must wait. I'll do what I can." The Blind Man chuckled. "Going away!"

Merriweather himself cut short the conversation. He had obviously bathed and shaved; about his snowy hair was the odour of Violets de Parme: his favourite scent. He almost danced into the room, and, though his

sharp eyes appraised the pair, he gave every sign of cordiality and refreshment after a long sleep. He retained the Shakespearean mood, in which he had last talked to Tony, and this, Tony felt, must mean that he considered as regained any ground lost a few hours since.

"Ah, cousin! Ah, my boy! 'I bid you good morrow with a modest smile, and call you brothers.' Where is our steaming coffee and our gentle Maria?"

She followed on his heels and, while she prepared the breakfast, the Blind Man improved the opportunity to lecture his cousin.

To whatever doubts of the speaker's intentions in other matters Tony's mind might furnish anchorage, there was no pyrrhonism possible regarding his attitude on the metaphysics of prohibition and total abstinence. He had, at his tongue-tip, all the stock phrases, all the pat arguments, and now he emitted every one. The demon Rum, shoes for the children, the emptying of prisons, the closing of insane-asylums—it came out, all of it, with the disregard for humour which is the sole true test of sincerity.

Merriweather winked at Tony and pulled down the corners of his rosebud mouth, but,

even if he kept the courage to meet statement with counter-assertion, he had no chance: the Blind Man's passion drove him with all the impetuosity of the water in the millrace at the island's edge. Alcohol was his bogie, the exorcism of it his religion. Tony gathered that a man might commit almost any other sin than that of intemperance and hope for forgiveness, but that he who tasted liquor, be he exemplary in all things else, was a lost soul. This hectic bigot had but lately been told that, in all probability, Merriweather was a murderer, yet the sole reproach that he found it in his conscience to launch against the little man was that he was a drunkard.

The victim endured in grimacing silence, occasionally trimmed with a pantomime of boredom; but it went on throughout the breakfast. It was a typical Maria-breakfast: coffee with thick cream fetched in some mysterious manner from some farm behind the hills; corn muffins and molasses; apple-butter; fried mush and savoury broiled ham just off the griddle; and notwithstanding the rain of words, three of the company ate ravenously. The hungry nonchalance of that meal struck Tony with renewed horror. Ellie!

Only once the Blind Man interrupted him

self. The room was close, he protested, and he had Maria open the door for the sake of the fresh air. A little later, still spouting social statistics, he went to it and opened it still wider. Then he spiritedly resumed his castigation of the Single Sin.

It was some moments later that there came a sound from the shore. Merriweather started.

"What's that?"

"I heard nothing," said the Blind Man. "Whisky plays tricks with your ears."

But Tony was on his feet. "It was an automobile-horn."

The sound repeated itself. Merriweather looked at the Blind Man, then ran to the window nearest on the York County shore and flung wide the shutter. On the broken roadway stood, in plain sight, a motor-car.

Merriweather's face went white. "Who next?" he cried.

The automobile had one occupant only: a young woman, who had stopped it just where the farther end of the bridge rested when it was lowered.

Maria, lumbering after her husband, looked out with an osseous stare; the Blind Man gave no sign. The young woman blew her horn.

Tony rushed to the door, but he was hastily jerked back.

"You idiot!" cried Merriweather. He fastened the door with catlike stealthiness. "We're not at home, Maria. She can't come in here!"

It was the Blind Man who answered and answered with a question:

"Who is it that can't come in here?" He rose. "Take your hand off me!" He shook himself from his host's detaining fingers. "Of course I am going out. Why should you be inhospitable?"

The horn continued to sound, more and more insistently. Merriweather's hands fell frightened; the Blind Man, with tapping cane, erupted from the door and rounded the house.

"Yes, yes!" His voice echoed through the crisp Spring air. "We hear you! Who is it?"

Tony followed. He wanted to rub his unbelieving eyes. Standing now beside her car, as glad a sight as sunshine, appeared the creature of all others most alien to such a company: a pretty girl, fair and fresh, young and athletic, her hair like cornsilk under a sport-hat of light blue. She was cupping her hands to her mouth:

"O, Mrs. Merriweather, let down the bridge, please! I've come to see how Mr. Merriweather is!"

Merriweather came out in a fury, but chained himself to calm. The girl had seen the Blind Man; the rest could not pretend absence.

"Let down the bridge," he ordered the turgid Maria. "And remember your manners, my dear. Our best friend—devoted." His voice was all but smothered by the swelling of his throat. "So sweet of her to come. *Damn her!*"

For the moment, he took no notice of Tony, who wondered if this were another victim; another conspirator he felt sure it could not be.

The bridge came down, and the girl came over. She walked across with a fearlessness that caught Tony's breath.

"What are you doing out here? And why *don't* you build a proper bridge, Mr. Merriweather? Anybody might fall into that horrid water and be drowned. Indeed, I don't see how it is you've never fallen in yourselves."

Merriweather embraced her slim hands in a double clasp.

"Habit, my dear girl—habit. We are so used to the rustic thing."

The Blind Man had slipped back to the house; Tony was watching narrowly when Merriweather remembered him. He was too close to be conveniently ignored. A perfunctory hand was waved in his direction.

"Miss Florin—Mr. Swope."

The girl scarcely nodded. "But what in the world is the trouble, Mr. Merriweather?" she anxiously inquired.

His brows puckered quaintly; he cocked his fluffy head.

"Trouble?" he repeated.

> "'Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
> Raze out the rooted troubles of the brain.'

I can have no troubles, my dear, when I observe 'the heavenly rhetoric of thine eye.'"

"But your letter! It asked me to come at once, to help Mrs. Merriweather about——"

"Why, I——"

But the Blind Man, ever with his tapping cane before him, had now re-emerged from the house. He was drawing nearer again and, just as Merriweather began to speak, the walking-stick touched that one's arm and seemed to bear a warning with it—or a command. Hastily Merriweather caught himself:

"Ah, yes. The letter. A little later." The voice had been lowered; now it rose once more. "Come inside now, Anna. You must be hungry. You surely started very early from Leeds?"

"I should say so; even the servants weren't up." The girl laughed perplexedly. "But I had the garage-key and helped myself. That's why I must hurry back: they'll be scared—nobody knows I came."

Tony could have wished her less specific in sketching the details of her departure. She should either have let her people know her destination, or else not have told these islanders of her silence at home.

"When did you get the note, Miss Florin?"

It was the Blind Man speaking, and his tone was suave. The others started.

"Oh!" The girl glanced at her questioner, then back at Merriweather. "Why, just before I left. A man rang the bell, and I went downstairs myself to see what on earth it could be at that hour of the morning. But *you* must know, Mr. Merriweather: you told me to bring the letter with me. Here it is. Do explain the mystery!"

Still smiling, she held out a note. Merri-

weather took it, glanced from it to the Blind Man and forced a smile of his own.

"All in good time—all in good time." He turned to lead the way to the house.

There was the barest moment when he might be beyond earshot. Tony stepped to the girl's side.

"For God's sake, get away from here as soon as you can!" he whispered.

She gave him uncomprehending eyes.

"Merriweather," he hurried on, "means you no good."

She flashed incredulity now—or indignation: "How absurd!" She swept to Merriweather's side and spoke rapidly and low.

Merriweather turned sharply. "'What madness rules in brainsick men!' Come right in, Anna. Sammy, remember your misfortune—and run along!"

He slammed the door and fastened it, leaving Tony outside and with him the knowledge that his course toward the girl had further entangled the threads of this new web. Anna Florin, the only living heir to the Keppel fortune! For some reason, Merriweather had not wanted her here; for some other reason, summoned by a mysterious letter, here she was.

Tony's brain sped, but sped in circles. Merriweather had not written but seemed to suspect the Blind Man. Was that suspicion correct? Why should the girl be summoned at all, unless by Merriweather intent on getting her out of the way, or forcing her to agree to the seizure of the estate? With Anna on the island, he would have a new trouble: he would have to keep her and Tony from piecing their information together. Only one thing seemed sure: he would threaten Tony again—threaten him, this time, with harm to Anna—in order to force him to pose as Georgie Keppel, and he would find some cowardly means to hold the lad to his pledge, once he had secured it.

Tony's first impulse was to employ his exile from the house in a search for Ellie—or her body—but he feared to go far afield: he feared for Anna. Softly, he crouched below one of the windows on the Doncaster County side, resolved to break his way in at the first cry for help.

None came. He waited long, but no sound issued from the house.

The air was heavy with espionage; as always now, he felt that, from somewhere unobservable, he was observed. Yet when the

door at last opened and Maria came forth, he did not hesitate to seize the hem of that advantage. Until she had passed the lawn and entered the shade of the trees beyond it, he attended. Then he darted through the now open door into the common-room.

Nobody there.

He hurried to the passage that led to what had been the unhappy quarters of little Ellie.

Empty, too.

Anna must be in Merriweather's study—in that gallery of torture! Tony ran upstairs.

There was a noise below: it must be Maria returning. He could afford no preliminary struggle outside the studio, yet the giantess was mounting the stairs. He was directly before his own room. Atiptoe, arresting his aching breath, he slid inside and softly swung-to the door.

The latch clicked.

Maria rushed. From the outside, a key was inserted and the lock turned. Tony heard her laugh.

A trap: the whole thing had been a trap of Merriweather's device—that he should wait outside until Anna was safely in the studio, that Maria should leave free means of approach,

that he should enter, be alarmed, hide in his own room, and then——

He had done precisely what had been expected of him!

He saw it now. He was doubly a prisoner.

CHAPTER XV

INSIDE

ONCE defensibly indoors, Merriweather had regained the cheerful briskness of his intrinsic manner. With an airy apology to Anna, he led the Blind Man into the hallway beneath the stairs for a brief moment, then, returning, beckoned his newest guest to follow him to his study above. He curvetted before her, whistling softly.

"My little harbour of refuge, where, for you, 'welcome ever smiles,'" he explained as he bowed her in. "You remember it?"

"Of course I do!" She seated herself on the edge of a divan. "I haven't forgotten your last house-party, even if you have." She leaned forward, clasping her hands about her knees. "Now——"

Merriweather had ensconced himself in his favourite chair; he crossed his neat legs delicately. "Now, of course, 'putting all affairs else in oblivion, as if there were nothing else to be done,' you want to know why you were called here."

"I'm eaten up with curiosity. And not only that; but this young fellow that you have here: he——"

Merriweather raised a calming hand. "You will want all your courage, Anna," he said. "As one of the oldest friends of your family, I have been working in your interests. Recently, I came across something—disturbing. I am—doing my best to smooth it out. Smooth it out. But secrecy is necessary.

"'Seal up your lips, and give no words but mum.'

If we act quickly and quietly, all may yet be well. That explains my—er, letter."

Her blue eyes were perplexed; her brows were knitted:

"But, Mr. Merriweather, please——"

Again the white flutter of that hand. "What would you say"—he leaned toward her and sank his voice—"if I were to tell you that—Georgie Keppel—has been—found?"

Had he expected consternation? She leaped to her feet.

"Impossible! But—oh, if you are sure—how perfectly splendid!" Then, as she saw the sudden alteration in his face: "No, no! You are making this up! It's some kind of joke!"

He hesitated. She had defended him against whatever it was that Tony's speech had hurled at him, there on the way to the house. Still a friend then; now her very existence depended for all its comforts, for most of its necessities, on her possession of the Keppel fortune.

"A joke?" he repeated. "I wish it were!"

She was a woman: it was easy for her to compute Tony's age.

"You don't mean that boy who said those horrid things about you?"

Merriweather thought that he saw his chance. "Yes, yes, my dear." He spoke with sad superiority, as one who can forgive crimes directed at himself, but who must protect his friends. "But it was not against me. He wants money."

"Well, if he's the heir——"

"Money from you, Anna. He—I regret to say that he has not been brought up as he should have been. He wants money for his silence."

Her perplexity deepened. "Why should he be silent if he is Georgie Keppel?"

"'We have strict statutes and most biting

laws' : there will be some purely legal difficulties in proving that he is Georgie."

"You are sure that he *is*?"

"There can be no moral doubt. They took him to the Welsh Mountain; then to New York. In the worst surroundings. He changed. But he has the data—a part of Georgie's dress—can produce witnesses, who will be safe through the statute of limitations. Oh!"—Merriweather waved distraught hands —"couldn't be worse—couldn't!"

"If the money belongs to him, he shall have it."

Merriweather did not seem to hear. "I heard of his plan. I pretended to be his friend. Brought him here. Sheer good luck. He swore he would throw you into the street, penniless! What was I to do? I had to keep him captive. Just so. He spoke the truth when he told you he was a prisoner."

"He didn't say that. He said *you* wanted to harm *me*."

"Ah, I see. Of course. Wanted to poison your mind against me. 'Whose gall coins slander like a mint'—well, he won't succeed in that, will he, my dear? And, failing there, he will see that what I have proposed to him is the only way out."

"I don't understand——"

"I have assured him that the legal technicalities are too many for him; I have just about got him to the point where I want him. Compromise."

"You mean *pay him?*"

Merriweather nodded. "Say, $50,000. Cash. Brought here, quietly, by you. He is a prisoner. I could compel him to sign papers —releases—denials——"

The girl's face was white. Her slim hands were clasped at her throat. Her eyes were watching Merriweather as if she could not, without their assistance, believe her ears. They grew more intent, those eyes; they saw, for the first time, beneath his mask of friendship, something of the real man. For just a moment, she was afraid. She wanted to shriek.

Then she regained the saddle of her soul. In a voice that shook only a little, she said:

"If this young man is George Keppel, he is entitled to everything. I do not want what doesn't belong to me, Mr. Merriweather."

"My dear Anna——"

She waved that aside. "Please call him up here at once. I want to talk to him."

Merriweather made a gesture as if he would soothe a fractious child. She drew away.

"If you won't bring him here, I'll go to him and find out what all this means!"

"Wait!"

She had faced the door. Merriweather's voice was now, however, a clarion of severe command.

"Why should I wait?" she demanded.

Frowning as if in painful indecision, Merriweather walked twice the length of the room, but always between her and the means of exit.

"I see," he said at last, "that I must tell you all. Painful as it is. Sit down again."

She remained standing, but her lips were anxious as she challenged: "Well?"

"Something more serious. About your poor mother."

A flush overspread her cheek; it rose to her cornsilk hair. "There is nothing that you can say about her, Mr. Merriweather."

"'Concerning the dead, nothing but good.' I know. Alas, you force me to break my silence, Anna. Can you—can you bear it?"

The girl's eyes flared. "*What* do you mean?"

"This. If you will not quiet the boy for your wealth's sake—admirable, high prin-

ciples—I applaud them—but—if you will not quiet the boy for your wealth's sake—then you must quiet him for your mother's."

Anna stood petrified. Merriweather watched her carefully. After the fraction of a second's pause, he went on:

"That means everything to you. I knew it would. That is why I tried to hold my peace. I was horrified myself when I learned the facts—and proved them. By an old letter. In this young rogue's possession. To secure for herself a share of the Keppel estate, she—*was a party to the kidnapping.*"

Expecting quite another effect from his words, he had drawn away from the door. Anna gave him one look: it had the finality of an excise-appraisal. She said nothing. She rushed to the door, flung it open and, before he could stop her, ran down the passage.

She was going to find Tony and learn the truth.

CHAPTER XVI

IN CODE

As on his first night within that room into which Maria had locked him, Tony laid hands upon the door to force it. As on that first night, he desisted.

What use, so long as Maria waited outside? The giantess could break him across her knee, and a fruitless struggle for Anna's rescue might only increase the girl's danger.

He sat down to think. The Blind Man had promised help. Would that promise hold good? There had certainly been bad blood of some sort between him and the Merriweathers; but there was a good deal about the stranger that Tony mistrusted. Whatever his difference with his cousin, it might by this time have been reconciled. Tony doubted everybody—everybody but the girl.

He stood up. There were running footsteps in the hall.

"*Wu ga*——"

It was Maria's voice that began; it was Anna's that interrupted pantingly:

"I'm looking for that young man. If you see him, tell him I want him."

Tony hammered on the door. "Miss Florin!" he called. "Miss Florin, here I am!"

But she had rushed by: Merriweather had counted on no such reaction as his news evoked from her—Maria had no orders to stay the girl. Anna was beyond the pursuit of his voice before the echoes of her own had been swallowed by the long corridor.

For one benevolence Tony returned to Heaven the thanks of a ready relief: as yet, it seemed, Anna's liberty was whole. And for another he was inwardly grateful: she wanted him—not for his aid, nor yet to accuse him; she wanted to question him. So much was published in her every tone.

He resolved to bide his time and save his strength: the latter he might soon need badly enough. He thought he heard the ponderous Maria drag herself away, as if in response to some silent summons—that he heard her descend the stairs and return. Then his door was opened, a tray of food was pushed inside, and the door relocked. The action outsped his realization of it.

He *was* hungry! It was good to know that,

at any rate, there was no intention of starving him. Cold ham, a salad: an inviting platter. Tony dug his fork into the meat.

The first red morsel was on its way to his mouth when there came a rattling at his window. Pebbles: someone calling. He hurried to the place.

Outside, almost within the narrow shadow of the house, stood the batlike figure of the Blind Man. The chin was held forward, the head up, the dark goggles tilted expectantly. Waiting down there, he must have heard the room-door close and have thrown the pebbles according to the dictates of his unerring ears.

"Hello!" said Tony in as guarded a voice as would carry.

Instantly the Blind Man's fingers went to his lips: silence. Then his rapid hands made the gestures of eating, and finally were clasped as if in anguish to his middle.

Tony's mind leaped back to the food that he had been about to bolt. The Merriweathers were attempting to poison him!

Again he addressed the sinister guardian below: "I'm much obliged to you. I'm on, and I'll be careful. Thanks!"

The Blind Man disappeared. Tony took from his plate enough food to lull suspicion

for at least a time, and flung it far out of the window. It was clear to him now that, with both the Keppel claimants in their hands, the Merriweathers meant to rid themselves, and the world, of one or the other: something had gone wrong; they could not manage the two. Tony, alone, might be coerced into making a claim for the fortune; Anna, alone, might be bullied or held for ransom; together, however the difficulties had become insurmountable. He wondered where Anna was now.

She had, in fact, run wildly out of doors. Merriweather: she had known him all her life as an effeminate, eccentric hanger-on in county society, an innocuous creature who, in early life, had made an unfortunate *mésalliance*, an encumbrance which, however, he never attempted to foist upon his friends. Now he had presented himself in the rôle of an unscrupulous bargainer, using an acquired knowledge for the protection of Anna's fortune, it was true, but using it with a contented disregard of ethics and seeking to ensure his project by a charge against her mother that was not only incredible, but, being incredible, sent out the fluttering signal of some personal motive beneath.

That mother's memory was sacred to her.

Over and over again, Mrs. Florin had told her daughter the story of Georgie Keppel's loss, and told it always with candid tears. On her dying bed she had spoken of it and charged Anna never to surrender hope of the child's ultimate recovery. Merriweather had lied in his last appeal: no proof that could be brought forward would convince his reluctant auditor to the contrary.

She came to the windlass and speculated as to whether Tony could have lowered the bridge and gone ashore: one glance assured her that the lock was intact. She looked at the treacherous water and shivered: herself an expert swimmer, she would have hesitated long before braving that mill-race. Much as Tony had made it, she accomplished a rapid exploration of the island, with much the same result: the place was a prison.

Stealing back toward the house on the Doncaster County side, she caught sight of the Blind Man. With his goggled face upturned toward a second-story window, he was performing the pantomime of one that had eaten and was in pain.

Very guardedly, she advanced. She saw that the batlike person was satisfied with the fruits of his endeavour. A voice sounded from

above. She could not catch what was said, but thought that, in a twilit shape at the window, she had recognized Tony.

The Blind Man slipped away. Anna followed him.

"What woman is that?" He heard her before she was near.

"It is Miss Florin. I want to speak to that young man you were just talking with."

The Blind Man did not turn his head.

"Follow me," he said, "as if you *weren't* following me."

He led, with Anna some yards behind. He did not pause until a thicket of pines screened them from the house.

"Let me have your hand."

She gave its youthful perfection into the keeping of his long claws. Rapidly, the fingers of his free hand ran over her face.

"Yes," he whined, "you must be Miss Florin. Very well. I am a poor blind man, my dear, but I am not powerless, and I am not a villain. I think I can arrange a brief interview; but, when you talk to him, you will have to speak quickly, and you must remember that there are other people about who will stop you if they know, or listen if they can."

She had no practise in subtlety. "Why can't I see him openly?"

"Because he is a prisoner. They won't let him out. Perhaps you can guess why, my dear."

Those black goggles hid all expression. She wished that she could see this man's eyes.

"You mean they are shutting him in that room because he is—— But aren't you his friend?"

"My child, I am trying to prove that I am his friend. I will be yours, if you will let me. Certainly I am not *theirs*. And I am the only person that *can* help you or him."

Still in that whine which is so frequently the voice of the blind, he developed his instructions. He would wait his opportunity to relieve the Merriweathers on guard before Tony's—Sammy's—door. They had told him, the Blind Man, a good deal. Himself, he was a poor relative, an afflicted being compelled to accept charity where charity was to be found; they despised and hated him, but, once he was on the island, they had needed him. If he was to be of assistance to the captives, he would have to maintain an appearance of loyalty to the jailers: she must see how this was so. But she must not believe him really

a partner in any crime that they might be meditating.

"A drunkard," he wailed; "the man is a drunkard, a slave to the Beelzebub of alcohol! It is the father of all evil. In spite of all I can do, he is even yet drinking secretly: I know it. And see what it has done for him, and be warned, my dear. Never let your lips touch lips that have touched liquor. It has made my cousin Merriweather a criminal—a kidnapper and a blackmailer."

The often scorned, the never more than tolerated little Merriweather: this was as hard to believe as that other story! Anna was glad that her own expression could not be seen.

"Go into the common-room," the Blind Man was saying. "Pretend that you are crying and don't want to be spoken to. Then wait."

She obeyed. Merriweather slipped down the stairs and up again, a bottle in his hand. Maria appeared after the Blind Man had come in and gone to the second floor, apparently to relieve her of her watch. The master of the house had hesitated before Anna, but one glance from her angry eyes had sent him scurrying to his study and his bottle; Maria came toward her, but, at sight of tears that

were real enough, grunted and turned to the interminable occupations of the fireplace. She was busied there when Anna saw the Blind Man peeping down with sightless goggles.

"I'm going to lie down," said Anna.

Maria indicated that there was her own bedroom to be used. The girl ran lightly up the stairs.

Almost before she realized it, she was in Tony's cell.

"Be quick," cautioned the Blind Man, "and be careful!"

He stepped into the hall. But he did not entirely shut the door: anything that they said would be said within his hearing. Indeed, through the crack, his lean face was poking toward them.

Tony had come forward with a glad smile. "Now do you believe what I said to you?"

As if she were afraid that he would take them, she held her hands behind her:

"I don't know what to believe. I've come here to try to find out. There is so much I don't understand."

Tony gave a significant look toward their guardian. "There's a good deal that nobody seems to understand, but there's one thing

sure: there's dirty work being done. There was a little girl here——"

The voice of the Blind Man cut him short: "Never mind the little girl. You have no time to lose. Stick to business. Don't you realize what I am risking?"

"It's just this;"—Anna came to the rescue —"Mr. Merriweather says you are Georgie Keppel, but that you will give up your claim to—to my money, if I pay you something."

Over her head,. Tony saw the interested movement of the Blind Man: his face came yet farther through the opening of the door. The lad did not relish it, though why he could not say. His wit was ready; as a school-boy, he had learned the art of talking without the teacher's detecting him: he had mastered the finger language of the deaf and dumb. Many a pupil had. Had Anna? It was worth a try.

Rapidly, his fingers formed the sentence: "Tell as little as possible."

She started, her brows puckered; then she understood. With some difficulty, but with enough accuracy, the memory of the old art returned to her. Her own fingers framed answer: "I understand."

For the benefit of the Blind Man, Tony explained in spoken words: "We'll talk the

deaf and dumb language. It will take a little longer, but it will fix things so's we can be sure the Merriweathers won't hear any sound."

He cast another glance at the Blind Man, but that expressionless face remained unaltered. All that the guardian said was "Hurry!"

With increasing facility, Tony formed the information that he wanted to convey:

"I'm not Georgie Keppel and don't mean to pretend I am. It's all their game. They want money. They are trying to bribe me into helping them. They think they have proofs enough to pull it off, but they can't pull off anything without my help—unless they drop me altogether and begin bullying you."

"But who are you?" Anna's fingers fairly cried the question.

"Anthony Tortona. My home's in Doncaster. But they don't know that. I was shell-shocked in the war. Merriweather got me out of hospital because I came close enough to the description of Georgie Keppel. He thought I'd lost my memory, and I had—but I got it back before he got my discharge. I went with him—never mind why. Then—well, then he tried to put up this game to me, and I wouldn't play it, and he found out that,

whoever I was, I knew I wasn't what he pretended. Now, then, how long can we hold out? One of us has to get ashore and bring help. I can't swim: can you?"

Her reply was instantaneous. "I'm a good swimmer, but I doubt if I could get across now. In a day or two, these Spring freshets will go down——"

"But can we wait?"

"What else can we *do*?"

"Won't you be missed? Won't there be a search for you?"

"I'm not sure. My servants are used to my taking sudden fancies to run about the country in my car and without warning. I might be gone over a couple of nights without their thinking it queer."

She must think it all out, she reflected. One of her purposes she had gained in this strange interview: Tony was honest—nobody with those steady brown eyes could tell the story that he had told and yet be a liar. Nevertheless, he had, by his own confession, deceived Merriweather while in hospital. Why? The Blind Man might be useful: she wasn't sure.

"Then," Tony's anxious fingers were declaring, "we must fight——"

The Blind Man popped his head into the hall and back again. "He's moving around in his studio—Merriweather! You'll have to go now, Miss Florin. Another time, perhaps ——"

Tony tried to intervene. "Can't you get us something to fight with? There are three of us!"

"One a woman and one a blind man! There isn't any weapon that I can lay hands on just now. I may try, later, but now—hurry, hurry! Remember: pebbles at your window, young fellow, when another chance comes!"

His swiftly groping talons touched Anna's skirt and seized on it. He dragged her from the room.

Once again, Tony heard the key turn in the lock.

CHAPTER XVII

"SHOOT!"

TONY waited. He waited while the afternoon sunlight lengthened in his narrow room—waited until the sunlight began to grow dim. Then there came steps down the hall and the door opened. Merriweather entered and leaned against it.

His face was flushed scarlet; his eyes were bright and bloodshot; the ringlets of his cotton-like hair were the victims of a supreme disorder. He wore a silk smoking-jacket and kept one hand in its side-pocket.

"I've come for your answer," he said.

He spoke thickly. Tony guessed that, in the solitude of his studio, he had been balancing projects on his habitual scales and decided that, if this prisoner relented, Anna might still somehow be managed.

"You haven't played fair," said Tony. "You've locked me up here. I told you I'd give you your answer this evening in the common-room."

Merriweather shrugged. " Quibbles. Must answer here and now."

" Suppose I say ' No '? "

Patently, the captor's will played streams of water on that fiery anger which his weakness had fed with alcohol :

" I shall be frank with you." He sucked in his breath with even more than usual noise. " The arrival of this girl—given me another way out.

" ' They have their—their exits and their entrances.'

If you fail me, I shall take it."

" You mean if you can't use me, you'll squeeze money out of her? "

Merriweather nodded his fluffy head. " Prefer to use you. More in it. Could have played the other game any time these ten years."

" But you couldn't get away with it then, and you couldn't now."

" I can get away with anything." The fellow's chest swelled now with temulent bravado. " Want to give you a square chance, however. Everything in your favour. Easy money. But you must decide now. Will you play your part honourably, or will you not? "

"Honourably?" Tony laughed. The old daring had come back to him. "You bet you I will. I'll play honourably, all right: I won't be anybody but myself, and you might as well know it now as any time!"

Merriweather's fists clenched; Tony could see the one in the pocket tighten over something.

"You're my prisoner. Both on this island and in this room. Nobody knows."

"Except Miss Florin."

"I've had her told that you've run away. Look out!" Tony had made a stealthy movement forward. "I have you covered!"

"With that automatic in your pocket? Miss Florin would hear the shot."

"What of it? It would only prove I meant business—when I came to deal with her."

Then Tony jumped.

"Shoot!" he shouted.

He made a flying leap. His arms encircled Merriweather. They crashed to the floor together. The pistol exploded; it exploded again and again.

Downstairs there was a responsive commotion. Anna was shrieking:

"Let me go! Let me go!"

" *Zonkrin !* " That was Maria's bass. " I got you tight now !

Once more the pistol sounded. The room was full of smoke. Merriweather's jacket was afire. Locked in the embrace of a life-or-death rage, over and over the fighters rolled. Tony's strength was superior, but the smaller man kicked, bit, scratched, battling like some feline creature of the woods. His teeth sheathed themselves in the lad's forearm.

Then the patter of steps on the stairs. At the door, which Merriweather had left open, the Blind Man nimbly entered.

On the instant of his appearance, he was at the two of them. With incredible power, he hauled them apart. One skinny hand found the wound in Tony's arm and wrenched it to agony; the other encircled Merriweather's throat. Both the combatants were jerked to their feet.

" You sot—you poor sot ! " The Blind Man shook Merriweather as if he had been a naughty child. " This is what liquor does ! This is the curse of Lucifer ! "

" Let me go ! " shrieked the caught murderer.

" Are you trying to kill him ? "

" Of course I am ! "

"And hang for it?"

"He's got to be killed." Merriweather was rapidly sobering, but snatched, to the last drunken breath, at the idea which had so lately obsessed him. "He's got to be got out of the road before anybody knows!"

"*I'll* know," smiled the Blind Man.

"You? A pretty one you'd be—to tell."

The Blind Man bent his goggled face close to that of Merriweather. He whispered something. Visibly, Merriweather wilted.

"Now come along," commanded the Blind Man.

Downstairs, Anna, in the vast prehension of the restraining Maria, heard the order. She heard the speaker add to Tony: "Stay where you are"—and heard Tony's door close and lock upon him. Followed a long whispering at the stairhead; then Merriweather and the Blind Man descended to the common-room together.

Twilight was falling, and it was impossible to read the faces about her, but Anna heard Maria ordered to prepare a pick-up meal, which the four ate in absolute silence; Merriweather would not look at the girl; after what had so lately happened, she feared to look at him. The supper over, Maria disappeared

and soon returned dressed in her funeral-black, her ridiculous bonnet atop her massive head. From the recesses of the space under the stairs, she dragged a spade and a heavy sack. With one of these in hand and the other over her shoulder, she made her way out of the house and toward the bridge.

" Stay here," said the Blind Man.

" If she is going to lower that bridge," said Anna, " I am going to cross it."

Merriweather faced her now—the new Merriweather. " If you try that, you will never get to the other side. Alive. I am armed, you know."

The girl shrank back. She saw the trio go out. Running to a shuttered window, she flung it wide and looked out. The Blind Man thrust his lean head in at the door.

" Remember the boy," he cautioned. " We must save the boy."

The final light of the afterglow fell on him. He was smiling, and Anna did not like his smile.

She turned again to the opened window. She saw Maria lower the bridge, then hand something to the Blind Man. She saw Merriweather and his bulky wife cross and vanish among the shadows of the tow-path.

Should she make a run for it? To what purpose? That new Merriweather, armed, desperate, was on the other side, while, here, close at hand, was Tony to whom she owed an attempt at rescue.

With infinite slowness, as it seemed, the Blind Man was raising the bridge. It swung into its upright position. Anna saw him take a key—the thing that Maria had handed him —and slip it somewhere between the folds of his black cloak.

She mistrusted him, but, if he failed her, there was, she now realized, another way. The bright lamp of resolution shone again in her blue eyes.

Through the deepening shade, he was making, stick outstretched, a nimble course to the house. The limbs of the great trees waved above him. Darkness was at hand. Anna, Tony and the Blind Man were alone together on the island.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE DREADFUL NIGHT

The Blind Man came tapping in at the door as Anna was lighting a lamp. He took off his cloak and flung it over a chair.

"Now then," he said; "we have not very long. I managed to get them to go ashore on something that I represented they must do before they handled the problem that you young people present. But we have very little time."

As he spoke, Anna, realizing that his blindness would prevent his observing her, raised the lamp so that she might the better study him. That same smile that she had before mistrusted was still on his features.

"Then give me the key," she demanded.

He raised a claw-like hand. "Wait, wait!"

"I want that key."

"Not till I have explained something."

Anna made her resolution.

"Then Tony—that young man—must hear you, too."

The Blind Man shrugged. "If you wish it."

He mounted the stairs, Anna at his heels.

"They're gone—they're gone, Tony!" she cried.

The Blind Man unlocked the door. The prisoner, warned by her voice, ran into the passage. Instantly, Anna put her hands to the Blind Man's back and gave a mighty shove: he staggered into the vacated cell. The girl slammed the door behind him and locked him there.

"Let me out! Damn you, let me out!"

The voice of the new prisoner rose to a shrill shriek from behind the door.

Tony caught at her. "What is it?" he gasped. His arm ached, but he was free.

"I believe he's with them—I believe he sides, someway, with the Merriweathers," Anna panted.

"But why——"

"Let me out!" shouted the Blind Man. "You fools, let me out!"

"Don't listen to him. The Merriweathers have gone ashore. He has left the key to the bridge in his cloak, and the cloak's downstairs."

From behind the door burst a bellow of rage.

"Stand aside! I'm going to shoot my way out of here!"

A series of shots immediately followed. They splintered the door.

"Will it hold?" asked Anna.

"I think so. He's strong, but not so strong as I am: he can't break it himself, and he won't have shots enough to help him."

She took the boy's hand and ran with him.

"I'm your friend!" the Blind Man was crying from above. "Can't you young idiots understand I'm your friend?" He punctuated his cries with more shots, and more.

Anna was already at his cloak in the common-room. Her fingers went through it. Then she turned it inside-out. Her face assumed the downward curves of dismay. She shook it—the craved tinkle did not follow.

"The key's not here!" she wailed.

"I thought you said——" began Tony.

"I did. I saw him take the key and—— Oh, he must have drawn it through the cloak and put it in a pocket of his coat!"

Above stairs, a sudden silence called to them.

"I'll go up and take it from him," said Tony.

"You'll be killed!"

"Not if he's used all his ammunition——"

Through the upstairs-door, the voice of the Blind Man sounded:

"I can hear you! You forget how well I can hear, my dears. I have shots enough left. When will you realize that I'm your friend—when will you come and let me out? Afraid? Are you afraid, you brave soldier down there? Afraid of a poor, blind creature, old enough to be your grandfather? I'm your friend, I tell you—I'm——"

"Come," said Anna.

She led the way from the house, though with no aim but to leave it. Under the trees they stopped while, against Tony's delighted protests, she tore a strip from her blouse and, with cool fingers, bandaged his arm. That done, they hurried farther from the tavern, discarding one plan after another, and came to the downstream end of the island.

"Look here," said Tony; "you said you could swim?"

She nodded.

"Well, the passage is wider here; the current isn't nearly so swift. Could you manage that?"

"Yes; but you couldn't."

"Sure I couldn't: I can't swim a stroke,

you know. But the thing's simple enough: you get ashore from here and go for help."

"And leave you?"

"Why not? You won't be of any help here, and I can take care of myself till you've got the State police on the job."

"The Merriweathers would be back before I could do that."

"What of it? I managed them before."

"Now they're desperate."

He knew it; he knew that, should they return, his chances for life—now that he had alienated the Blind Man—would be small indeed; but his white determination was fixed: he would obtain safety for Anna.

"You must try it."

"I won't." Under the starlight she faced him.

He seized her arm. "You must!"

She smiled a little. "Were you thinking of throwing me in? If you do, I'll simply swim back."

He had contemplated some such madness. He wished that he had not confessed his helplessness in the water; then he might have gone in with her—to his own death, to be sure, but to her salvation.

"Won't you please——" The cry of an

owl cut him short. "The Merriweathers!"

She dragged him along toward the bridge. "How silly of us not to remember: if we can't get there, they can't get here."

Tony whooped. "That's so! But be careful: they might shoot."

"Not they. So long as they couldn't get to us, to hide the results of the shooting, they'd be only hanging themselves."

There, surely enough, were the Merriweathers, a now somewhat clay-stained pair, standing in the starlight on the tow-path. Tony made them a profound bow.

"I'm very sorry to have to turn you away from the Cross Keys Tavern," he called; "but there's not a room in the house. I've just given up my own to that blind friend of yours!"

Maria's wide mouth opened, and from it rushed a howl of rage. It was stopped by the pressure of her husband's hand upon her mouth. He pulled her into the shadows.

"What are they up to now?" asked Tony.

His answer came out of the darkness: the first snorts of a turning motor.

"My car!" gasped Anna. "They're cranking my car! Where do you suppose they want to go in it?"

Tony was suddenly very grave.

"They are going to get help," he said; "help from some of their own kind. It's a gang: I'll tell you about it later. Anna"—she had used his Christian name without reflection; without reflection, he used hers now—"we've *got* to be clear of this island before they come back with that crowd. We've got to—I have it: let's build a raft!"

They turned to with a zest sprinkled with the salt of healthy fear. They searched for wood under the trees, but they discovered no means of lashing together such material as they found. They dragged—to an accompaniment of threats and cajolings from the imprisoned Blind Man—the great table out of the common-room. Tony broke the legs from it, and they got it—for his arm was only slightly stiffened—to the foot of the island: once in the water, it would not bear their weight.

Again they searched. They wasted extravagant half-hours in hunting, in experimenting. They toiled until midnight, and later: one disappointment after another rewarded them. Tony's ultimate hope was a lashing together of doors from the house: not a door would budge off its hinges unassisted, and what tools

there were about the place had been securely locked up.

"It's no use," said Tony at last.

They were in the common-room again. From overhead came the voice of the Blind Man:

"Of course it's no use. When will you two realize that you *have* to depend on me?"

Tony resorted to the language of the deaf-and-dumb:

"I can open his door and try to rush him."

Anna shook her cornsilk hair. "If you try that, I'll insist on going up with you. You can't stop me. No, we're together in this—all the way."

He knew her well enough now to know that she meant it.

Again the Blind Man's voice: "*When* will you listen to me? I have the key. Take me with you, and *you* shall have it."

The eyes of the young people encountered one another.

"Do we dare?" whispered Anna.

"We daren't do anything else," said Tony. "Stand by for treachery."

They mounted the stairs.

"All right!" Anna called. "We'll take you at your word. We're coming!"

Tony's hand was on the door. He turned the key, and then——

Again, but this time it seemed as from a dozen throats, there rang out from the tow-path the cries of the unclean owls.

The Blind Man stood before them. His very goggles sparkled anger.

"You've done it!" he declared. "You're too late. I warned you, but you wouldn't believe me. Listen to that!" He held up his thin hands; there was no need: the cries echoed and re-echoed above the flood. "They'll have stolen some boats within an hour. Merriweather's got the remnants of the old Abe Buzzard gang together. What good's the bridge-key to us now?"

CHAPTER XIX

"WHO'S NEXT FOR HELL?"

Was it too late? Either man would have rushed, in any case, to action. It was the eternal feminine that delayed them yet a moment more.

Anna clutched their recent prisoner's coat.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

Tony laughed bitterly. "What does it matter who he is?" the boy interposed. "We've got to hide, or fight, or get away—and we haven't any time to lose!"

"I don't care. If we're going to work together, we must trust one another. I won't have any more association with people like these Merriweathers—not if I have to die instead!" She flung that over her shoulder at Tony and repeated to the released captive: "Who *are* you?"

The red moment of the first excitement was over: he, too, seemed unhurried. Some light

there was downstairs; by so much of it as climbed, the young inquisitor could see the thin smile that flickered at the corners of the Blind Man's mouth.

"I am not much more than you see," he said. "I am Martin Farquhar Tupper Merriweather's poor relation. For years I was under his influence. Rum did it." As his tongue touched the hypnotic word, his voice sprang to the pitch of a revivalist's experience meeting. "Rum made me a member of the Buzzard gang. I lay in the gutter. Then, by God's grace, I learned the evils of it; He guided me into a temperance meeting—hiding from the police. I heard God's truth about Rum. I repented; I offered up my soul. I became a beggar, rather than go back. They cast me off." He descended to the practical: "And here I am."

"But you have some hold over *him*—over Mr. Merriweather." Anna, being a woman, took the practical with her in all her flights. "I could see that. We both could!"

"Hurry," pleaded Tony.

But she shook her stubborn head. "What is that hold?" she insisted.

The Blind Man nodded: "I know Merriweather's past. The other day I got wind of

this new deviltry. I sent an anonymous warning to your lawyer, Miss Florin—Hilegas—just before coming here: vague, but it may be enough—if we can hold out. I sent that letter to you, too. I wanted to bring you here to spoil this impersonation."

"Come on!" Tony urged.

"You were friendly with him," Anna persisted to the Blind Man.

"As friendly as he'd let me be." The voice was pathetic now. "After all, I am only a blind beggar, and he threatened. I told him I'd got you here to use in case this boy proved recalcitrant; I didn't tell him anything at all about the Hilegas warning. Can't you see how it was?" He spread his talons wide. "Why, I got them ashore—we could all have run away together! You must believe me: the thing is self-evident."

Tony shot a glance at Anna. "I told you," he said in the sign-language: "we've got to trust him. Come!" he added aloud.

"Very well," said she. "I am ready now." She was but half-persuaded, yet she had gone, she knew, as far as then was possible. She bowed her head.

At her acquiescence, the change that came

over the Blind Man was electrical. Visibly, the beggar dropped from him. His thin head rose; his pointed chin shot out. He raised his hands and, as a conjurer might summon to his shoulders a general's epaulets from the rafters of a theatre, there descended upon him the insignia of rank.

"Then now we must act." His words struck like well-directed pistol-shots. "Our one chance is to hold out till Hilegas acts—and he's a lawyer: slow to move, all of them. I gave him to-morrow morning as a date; I had to have that long to make sure my suspicions about that rum-hound Merriweather weren't incorrect. There are arms in the house: I found that out." His black goggles turned toward Tony. "Can you shoot?"

"It's been my job since '17. My arm's sore where that fellow bit me, but it's not too sore to be useful."

"And you?" The goggles bent to Anna.

She was ready now. "I can use a rifle. I used to like target-work."

"Good. You know my hearing: I can throw pebbles by it, and I am a fair shot by it, too; but the racket of this infernal river may interfere. There are only three sides that

they can attack from." He spoke with the inalienable habit of command, with the finality of the marshal dictating the plans of his campaign. "They'll come in a bunch from whatever side they pick: they're all cowards. Here"—he produced the bridge-key; tied to it was a smaller key—"there's a chest in the hall under the stairs; Merriweather used to keep his guns and ammunition there. Get them."

Within two minutes, the trio were standing in the common-room, a rifle in the hand of each and shells enough to withstand something of a siege. They were examining the weapons when the Blind Man held up his disengaged hand.

"Listen!"

Above the roar of the waters came the sound of an axe.

"So that's it!" He chuckled. "They're making their own bridge. Easy! They'll have to cross one at a time. I wonder which they'll ever be able to persuade to cross first!"

His thin nostrils dilated; he resumed the garment of his bitter smile; in either sunken cheek there dawned a spot of pink.

"We must pick them off as they come,"

he continued. " Lead the way. But under cover: through the pines."

Tony hesitated. " And Anna? "

" I'm coming, too," she declared.

The Blind Man's tone hardened. " You will stay here."

" I won't! "

" You will."

" You must," said Tony.

Anna stood there, her breast heaving. " I have just as much right——" she began.

But the Blind Man cut her short. " You have no right to risk our freedom," he said sharply. " If you are killed, our one reliable witness is out of the way when Hilegas comes. The gang will run, and here will be your dead body and the respectable Merriweather with a plausible story—and only a blind beggar and an army-deserter to contradict him."

" I'm not a deserter! " cried Tony.

" From all you tell me, you'll have a hard time proving that. I'm in command here, and I want obedience! "

He got it: the logic of his argument shut the door in denial's face. The two men left Anna in the common-room and made a slow and roundabout way to the threatened water-front.

"Tell me," said the Blind Man, "when we get to the edge of the trees."

Tony told him.

"Lie down," the Blind Man ordered. "Go forward on your belly; I'll follow, keeping a hand on your feet. Get behind the windlass. Is there a moon?"

The moonlight was flooding the canal.

"Then tuck me beside you at the windlass. Lie low till they get their bridge in place. Don't shoot till the first man is half-way over. Then keep your nerve; aim carefully—and fire. There's everything in drawing first blood from such a gang: you've got to kill."

They crawled on. They durst not raise head; for Tony, all that was visible was the patch of silver moonlight, moving with him and the stems of the grass in it that smelled of the open country's deceptive freedom. All that he could hear was the regular blow of the axe and the roar of the waters; its increment marking each stage of their difficult advance. Slowly, with infinite pains, the videttes achieved their objective. Together they crouched at the windlass. Slowly Tony raised his head over its top.

As he did so, a great tree fell on the farther bank. He could see scurrying silhouettes run

up to it—could see axes flash in the moonlight, as it was rapidly trimmed of its branches —could see a second group of shadows drag it to the tow-path and, with a mighty effort, propel it across the brawling chasm. The farther end came to rest almost at the base of the windlass.

Tony delivered a whispered report to his commander.

" Good. Have your rifle ready, but don't hurry."

There was an excited conversation among the shadows. Arms waved in angry gesticulation. There were shouted orders and protests shouted still more noisily. Then the figure of little Merriweather extricated itself. He held a pistol levelled. His high voice crossed the chasm.

" You drew the short straw, Lem Muhlenbach. Stick to the agreement. Get across that bridge." Tony fancied he could hear the hiss of the little man's breath between sentences. " When you are half-way over, Tod Norton will follow. Then the rest—according to plan. Come, now! If you don't, I'll shoot—by God, I will! "

Slowly, a slouching form was detached

from the group. Slowly it approached the improvised bridge.

The Blind Man's hot breath brushed Tony's startled ear: "I heard. Let Muhlenbach get more than half-way over. I know him—the yellowest coward of the lot: it'll take him a good while!" There followed a soft chuckle. "Then let Tod start. Take a careful aim. And get the two of them—first come, first serve!"

Dealing death in a charge, or against a charge—even picking off a uniformed enemy whose head pokes its careless top above a distant trench—is one thing. Killing men in everyday life—lying quiet and waiting for them to creep forward to their end: that is quite another affair. Tony's breath came short; his hands shook a little; but he realized that this, too, was war.

The argent torrent of the moonlight fell full on the improvised bridge. Across it a figure worked its way, astride, the hands feeling cautiously, the chin drawn tight to the chest, as if death had already been scented from the darkness ahead.

"Keep going!" cried Merriweather.

("Is he at the middle?" the Blind Man whispered.

"Almost," whispered Tony.)

"Now you, Tod!" shouted the leader ashore.

Another form dragged itself from the enemy group and essayed the passage. This one was even slower than his predecessor.

"Hurry!" Merriweather vociferated.

("Is Tod six yards from shore?" the Blind Man demanded.

"Yes."

"All right. Take your time now—and fire.")

Tony levelled his rifle over the windlass top. There had been no job in all his service with the A.E.F. that he hated half so much; it was necessary to think of Anna's safety and Ellie's revenge if he were at all to manage it. That crouching figure was death to Anna. . . .

Tony fired.

The first man on the bridge swayed sidewise, clutched at the bark of the horizontal tree and fell.

"Now for Tod!" cried the Blind Man.

But Tony couldn't do it. His stomach heaved. Then, before protest could issue from his commander or reprisal from ashore, the man Tod, in a panic-fear, flung up his hands and dived into the fatal flood.

A lunatic chorus of consternation was rising from the bandits.

"Got them?" the Blind Man demanded.

"The first," said Tony, his jaw quavering. "The—the other fellow jumped."

"Into the water? He was always white-livered! Well, he's done for himself, then."

The chorus ashore plunged into sudden silence, as the Blind Man's voice rose loud. Lean talons to his mouth, he yelled:

"Hello, Cousin Merriweather! Hello, comrades all! This is your poor blind friend talking, my boys. Who'll be the next to come over to shake hands with him?"

Somebody sent a futile pistol-shot in the direction of the ambush.

They heard Merriweather: "Cut that out!"

"So," continued the Blind Man. "You don't want too much noise, do you, cousin? I thought you wouldn't, not even in these wilds. Well, well, my boys—who's next for Hell?"

Tony had drawn back to cover. Now he gingerly looked out again. For a second time, the group of his enemies was in the passion of argument. Finally Merriweather's voice rose above it, addressing the island:

"There's only one thing you can say that we shall listen to. Surrender!"

The Blind Man's answer sounded hideously jocund:

"A fine word, cousin! But that's not you talking, Martin Farquhar Tupper: that's Rum. You must have sneaked a bottle ashore with you. You couldn't talk big, otherwise. Wait till the rum's out of him, boys, and you'll hear him sing another tune. You notice he isn't risking his own hide any: he was always the yellowest of the lot, and you know it!"

"Shall I try a crack at him?" asked Tony. Merriweather he could slay without qualms.

"Aren't they in the shadows?" the Blind Man countered.

They were.

"Then don't waste ammunition."

His jeers must have had some effect on the rank and file of the gang. Tony could see them waving angry hands at Merriweather. He could see Merriweather urging one after another to attempt the crossing, and could observe that one after another refused.

He reported to the Blind Man. The result was another jibe.

"So!" shrilled the Blind Man. "They aren't fools enough to bite lead for you, cousin? I thought they wouldn't be. He says you're sure to win, boys, doesn't he? Then why don't you let him come across himself? He's anxious to, you know. Oh, so anxious! But he's so modest, too: he doesn't want to force himself to the front of things!"

As both the men in ambush knew, their chief advantage lay in a prolongation of the bridge attack, but the Blind Man's insults may have overshot their mark. Ashore, the bandits held a hasty consultation and, above the noise of it and the water, Tony heard one sentence:

"Come on: we'll get the boat!"

The Blind Man also heard. To Tony he counselled:

"We mustn't let them know we suspect that."

He called across the water:

"I've said my last word to you, but we'll be here at the landing to give you a welcome whenever you get up your courage again!"

Tony asked him: "What shall we do?"

"Wait till they drag back their bridge. They daren't try to cross it again while they think any of us is here—and they must think we're going to stay here. But we must crawl

back to the house and get ready. The boat means an attack in force. It's what I first expected—and it's serious."

CHAPTER XX

THE BOAT-ATTACK

"In the end," said the Blind Man, "a woman always gets her own way; Miss Florin shall have hers: this time we will take her with us."

As he had foreseen, to prevent its use as a means of escape while they were otherwise engaged, the bandits had dragged their impromptu bridge ashore. The vedette was in secret retreat. Having regained the shelter of the pines, they were erect again.

At his companion's declaration, Tony gasped.

"We can't have her!" he expostulated.

"We have to have every gun that we've got," his companion grimly insisted.

"But a girl?" Tony thought of that Russian Legion of Death, of which, while in France, he had heard so many rumours; he shuddered. "I won't allow it!"

"*You* won't allow it?" The Blind Man

stopped in his tracks, his cane suspended before him. His head thrust itself forward like the head of some venomous grey snake, about to strike. "Do you——" he began again. But he brought his lean jaws together with a sharp click of repression and continued on his tapping way. He said no more until they had reached the house and told the expectant Anna what had happened.

She was waiting for them at the door. Hearing the shots, she had had all she could do to restrain herself from joining them at the water-front.

"If you had been five minutes longer, I should have come," she said.

The Blind Man nodded. "So now," he concluded, "they are going to attack by boat. That means many at a time. If they manage to make a landing in force, we shall either have to surrender or be killed. All we can do is to pick off as many as possible while they are on the way. If we pot enough, we may make the rest turn back. We can't spare you, Miss Florin."

Her blue eyes sparkled. "Of course I'll join you!"

"Of course you'll do nothing of the sort!" Tony protested.

"I want to help."

Tony turned to the Blind Man. "What you told us about keeping her safe, for a witness, is just as good now as when you said it."

"Not quite." The Blind Man's smile was chilly. "This time, two can't hold them, and, if they land, they'll send you and me to a court where witnesses aren't necessary. As for Miss Florin, what they will do to her I leave you to imagine."

Tony attempted further remonstrance.

"No," said the Blind Man, "they won't shoot unless they have to, and we shall have time to barricade ourselves. There will be plenty of chance to send her to the rear, if things get too hot; but at the start we must have her."

There was no further argument: Anna already had a rifle in her hands. "Which way will they come?"

But there Tony interrupted:

"If they leave the point opposite the bridge, can't we lower it and get ashore?"

The Blind Man shook his head. The enemy themselves would not dare a crossing, but they would leave a sentry to give the alarm in case the beleaguered essayed escape.

"There is only one possible way for them

to come," he went on; "they've stolen one or two boats, and they've come from up-river: they had to, if they came from the Welsh Mountain. Besides, no boat could make headway against this current. They will turn her loose from above and try for the upper end of the island."

He was right. The defenders had scarcely ensconced themselves behind some hastily dragged-together logs at the point he indicated than, peeping over the top, they saw a movement on the shore above them. With sleeves and trousers rolled high, a party of barefoot men were launching a long, narrow skiff.

"We must try to hold them till sunrise," the Blind Man was saying. "Even in this deserted country, they will be afraid to be too active by broad daylight."

Tony's eyes were intent upon the boat. "She has a motor-attachment," he presently announced.

"No use just here," the Blind Man answered. "The current can do their work for them."

As he spoke, the gangsters, with a wild shout, got their skiff clear and, tipping it to a frightful angle, piled dripping into it. A huge, moustached fellow with an oar in hand

pushed off. Caught in a strong eddy, the boat spun around on its own centre, and then, headed directly for the watchers, leaped, like a live thing, into the boiling current.

"Ready," cautioned the Blind Man. "They are a noisy lot. I can do a little shooting by ear at this place; but you two must pick your men. Are they close? Now then: *Fire!*"

Tony had chosen the big fellow, who was now at the tiller. The three rifles spat. A shriek responded: the big man crumpled into the bottom of the skiff; the tiller, for an instant, swung helpless. When a substitute approached it, the inanimate thing, galvanized to life by the stress of the water, slapped backward and, striking him full in the chest, sent him sharply overboard.

Tony and Anna caught their breaths: the river was fighting for them.

It was fighting—and it would win. It twirled the skiff about as a boy whips a top—lifted it high above the angry surface and then dashed it, splintering, against one of the sunken rocks that defended the approach to the island.

Only a few seconds and the attack was ended. At first, the entire crew was strug-

ling in the river; at the quick last, only one was visible, and he had been whirled ashore at the feet of Merriweather and a group of his remaining men, gathered there to watch the fortunes of their Armada.

"Scored again!" The Blind Man's laughter reached to Heaven.

Anna hid her face in her hands.

The sudden dawn rose over the river-hills.

"The sun!" Tony clutched the Blind Man's sinewy arm. "The sun's up!" he cried.

Contented laughter answered him.

"They ought to have divided, and one party tried the tree again while the other was here. But they were too much afraid of sharpshooting. The sun—and I told you that they won't dare to do anything by daylight. If only Hilegas pays attention to my warning, we shall have nothing to do but wait." The Blind Man flung a departing curse at his cousin and, turning, led the way again to the old tavern. "We will ask you to get us a bite of breakfast, Miss Florin."

Anna was following with tardier foot, her head still lowered. Tony, falling in by her side, eased her of her rifle and, in so doing, his hand touched hers. Somehow, his fingers

closed about her cold palm, and the palm, if it did not return their pressure, at least remained impassive.

"Of course it was a pretty tough thing for you to see," said Tony; "but the worst of it's over now."

She shook from her the memory of death, but, as she raised heavy eyes to his, death in expectation seemed to lurk there.

Tony saw it. "Why, you heard what *he* said: all we've got to do's to wait for Hilegas."

Her answer was sufficient. "If they can keep us on this island, they can keep other people away from it."

"But we've got the most of them. All that boatload but one went down. None of them lived even to reach *our* shore."

As he spoke, however, doubt lowered its sable folds about him. He was, indeed, sure that none of the attacking-party had been washed alive to the island, but he was by no means certain as to how many survived out of the entire body that had been summoned against them on the mainland. There was matter of vital importance: the determination of just what force was still to be reckoned on. A dim plan—a plan that, he told himself, he

should have thought of days ago—began to form in his mind.

"Don't bother," he pleaded. "I'm sure I'm right. We're safe now."

He pressed her hand again, but this time she snatched hers away.

"You haven't explained everything to me," she said.

"You saw as much as I did."

"I don't mean about those men."

There was drawn between them a little line of silence. The sunlight began to filter through the trees and to sparkle on her face.

"Then you mean," he at last blurted, "about myself?"

Her assent was a lowering of her eyes.

"Why—why, what haven't I explained?"

But he knew the answer: Lottie.

"You haven't told me," said Anna, "why you came here with Mr. Merriweather in the first place. You wouldn't have told him—you wouldn't have pretended you were somebody else if there wasn't some reason for not wanting to be yourself."

Yes, Lottie. And he had all but forgotten her! He might have known that the Lotties of this world are not so easily erased. Contrition, despair, settled on him.

"You're right," he said. "Down in Doncaster, where I boarded while I was at college, the landlady—she had a—a daughter—— Before the war—well, she thought I was going to marry her, I guess."

Anna's proud head rose. A rapid stride brought her beside the Blind Man. She did not look back.

Tony choked. Anger arrived, but shame remained. Very well, there was his plan; he could at least serve. He stood still; the others went forward, apparently ignorant or heedless of his pause. He waited a moment; then slipped noiselessly among the pines.

Hurriedly, but quietly, he made his way to the downstream end of the island, skirting, in his route, the Doncaster County shore. Here, as he had remembered, the lee of their bit of land created a brief peace in the waters; beyond that, the danger-zone began again, but the current swung toward the York County side: there was one chance in a hundred for the success of the thing he planned.

He searched for a log and found a rotting one. He flung off boots and jacket and rolled the piece of wood to the river's edge. Then, having waded as far as he could, he got astride

and paddled with his hands until the first swirl of the river caught him.

The log gave a sudden twist. It plunged, nose down, into the water. With desperate arms and legs, Tony encircled it. He was under the water—above it—under again. He was shooting forward with lightning speed—shooting under it—spinning in dizzy circles. His eyes were whipped, his mouth was full; a terrific roar hammered at his ears. He knew nothing; he was buffeted again to consciousness. His hold was torn—regained—torn and regained. The next time——

There came a great bump. Tony lay panting, the log careening away toward the Chesapeake, but the boy's hand firmly gripping the roots of a providential oak that grew by the water-side on the tow-path along the York County shore. . . .

He lay there until he had recaptured enough breath to proceed. The island lay a half-mile upstream, silent, beautiful in the morning, without hint of the suspense that inhabited it; all about him, the forest's stillness rose, serenely above the rumble of the waters: there was not a sign of the dangers that lurked beneath. Calling to his assistance every art of the scout that he had learned in France, he

began to accomplish a slow progress along the bank.

He trod softly, but stopped at every breaking of a twig. Twice he crouched behind trees, certain that the enemy had discovered him and were upon him; once he lay for what must have been twenty minutes in a cleft of rock before certain that the noise which had alarmed him was a coon in the thicket by his side. Then, at last, he found himself in the little clearing at the very edge of the old lock.

He lay flat on its edge and looked about him.

He had made a mistaken circle around the spot where, when it was lowered, the shore-end of the bridge reposed. The tow-path was deserted; ashore the hill, dark as night with trees and underbrush, rose high. At his left yawned that rotting lock, almost forty feet in depth, its perpendicular sides slippery and green, its bottom full of the black, sucking mud of which he had thought, when first he saw it on the afternoon of his arrival at Long Level's end, that it would engulf, like a slimy quicksand, any living weight that touched its hungry surface.

He turned from it, shuddering. He turned

to see a group of gangsters, with Merriweather at their head, strolling down the tow-path.

Tony's nerves had not recovered from that fight with the waters. He started back and, starting, lost his balance.

He was falling into the lock.

CHAPTER XXI

IN THE OOZE

TONY struck with a crash. Sparks flew before his eyes—sparks and the one realization: "It's all over—this is the end!"

But he did not lose consciousness, and it was not the end. The shoulder above his bitten arm ached, but was not broken. Moreover, he had indeed struck with a crash—not enough, it seemed, to alarm the approaching gangsters, but enough to assure him speedily that his landing-place was somehow not the mud he had so dreaded.

He drew himself into a sitting position and, holding his aching head, took account of his situation.

Behind him—close behind—was one side of the lock. He was sitting on a small spot of the bottom that had been baked relatively hard by yesterday's sun and not thoroughly thawed by the night; some fallen rock or logs must be beneath it, forming a tiny oasis in the fatal ooze on every hand. The walls rose per-

pendicular; a shimmering green without any token of foothold; there was no hint of any means of escape, but there was also no threat of immediate danger.

Then he heard voices above him, and his eyes travelled painfully toward them. No threat? Over the edge of the lock-side dangled bare feet and boots: Merriweather and his companions had stopped for a talk and were seated there.

Tony drew tight against the slimy planks. It seemed that an hour passed in idle words above. Sometimes he could hear whole phrases. Only now and then did he catch news of any value—but of what value could any news be to a man so immured?

"When'll they git back?" The voice of a gangster floated down to him.

"Not before evening." That was another gangster's voice. "'Twouldn't be safe to hook more boats before then."

"If they can only git a dory or two, there won't be no more upsettin'," commented the first speaker.

The sun slowly flooded more and more of the lock-bed. The men talked on and on.

Tony learned at last their plans: Merriweather's scheme was now to make an end of

him and force Anna to pay her own ransom —it had come to that. And he learned their number : there were five above ; five more had gone to steal boats for another attack by water, to be made, most likely, in the evening.

None of the brigands had as yet more than glanced into the pit, and none that did glance looked in his direction ; but at any moment one of them might do so. The sunlight drew nearer and nearer.

It was all very well to know these plans of theirs ; but, so long as he lay here, there was no use to which he could put the knowledge : there was no use to which he could put any knowledge. Piecing their deductions together, he saw that the Blind Man and Anna had been right—as far as they went : if Hilegas came, with enough men to help him, before that night, the pair on the island might be saved ; Tony himself might be saved. Otherwise, the Blind Man and the girl—the girl and the Blind Man !—were doomed, and Tony must betray himself, be disclosed, or stay down here and slowly die.

Meanwhile, he had to huddle in the filth and wait. He thought of the trenches in France : they had been bad enough, but here he dared not make even the slightest sound for

fear of attracting the fatal attention of the enemy; for fear of strangulation in the mud, he dared not shift his position to secure a full and more careful survey of the lock.

He was very hungry. The gangsters, he could hear, began to eat—cold food, no doubt, which they had brought with them from their Welsh Mountain homes. Crusts were flung into the lock, but none fell near him, and he might not seek any: he might not budge.

Sore from his battle with the river, bruised by his fall and cramped by the necessary immobility, he nevertheless felt drowsiness stealing over him. He had had no sleep the night before; the horrors and discomfort of his situation could not war long against his healthy body's demand for rest. What use to keep awake? The sun might reveal him by reaching his refuge while he slept; but, even if he remained awake, he could not afford to court discovery by moving out of its path, nor was there any place of safety to which to move: his oasis was indeed tiny, and all around it the deep mud trembled gluttonously.

Tony softly drew up his knees, clasping them in his arms, and rested his chin on them. He closed his eyes. . . .

He must have slept some hours, yet the

gangsters, when he awoke, were still loafing overhead. The full sun was pouring down on him. He heard a gangman swear; then he heard, or thought he heard, something else. Had he heard it? It was something close at hand. What was it? Something or other just here in the mud.

Tony was frightened, the worse because he could not tell why or at what. No man had descended into that pit. He wanted to turn his head toward the sound—and did not want to.

It was scarcely a sound at all. It was a soft, velvety movement. And it was not a yard away.

By a violent effort of the will, he looked.

A streak of brown and gold was twisting in the sunlight. Two streaks—three.

The bottom of the old lock was swarming with copperheads.

"Look at that! Snakes below there!"

An idle gangster was gazing over the lock's rim. Tony crushed himself tight against the oozing wall. Death; but which way: at the hands of the gang, or by the fangs of the serpents?

A shot rang out. Another followed. Faces —dreadful, grinning faces—were peering

down. The brigands were shooting at the copperheads.

"Stop!" It was Merriweather's staccato, and it came freighted with a horrid vindictiveness. Punctuating it, there was a little splash in the mud directly under Tony's nose. "I told you to cut that out!" Merriweather was concluding. "Told you no firing!"

One of the faces answered, but it addressed not Merriweather; it addressed the other bending faces and faces invisible.

"Here," it cried, "get a rope, you fellows! Merriweather gave me a jolt, and I dropped my gun down this damn lock. That rope o' yourn, George. Get a-holt o' her an' lower me down this hell-hole! Come on, all o' you: look over here an' see if you can't see where my gun is!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE BLIND MAN'S SECRET

As soon as it struck, Tony had instinctively plucked from the mud the thing that fell there: an Army automatic, the duplicate of Merriweather's. He looked: the clip was full.

He crouched now against the lock-wall, the pistol ready. They would shoot him as if he were a beast in its cave, but he would first have killed the man who swarmed down that rope. Unless Tony were seen before any descent was attempted! In that case——

"Don't hold!" cried somebody. "Make the rope fast to that there post. There you are!"

The end was flung over. It trailed not five feet from the captive.

"Aren't you afraid? Afraid of snakes, Conrad?" Merriweather's voice sounded its sarcastic note from somewhere out of view.

"Hell: snakes!" But it was clear that Conrad hesitated. "We can't spare no pistols, Mart—not for to-night, we can't."

"Well, then——"

A cry sounded from the river-bank. One of the gangsters ashore replied.

"It's the boats: away ahead o' time! Come on see 'em!"

As if at the waving of a magician's wand, the heads all disappeared from above. Feet pounded on the tow-path. Tony thrust the pistol beneath the waist-band of his trousers. He felt faint; it was too good to be true: they had run to the waterside and left him that rope-way to freedom.

He jumped for it. He forgot the copper-heads; he all but forgot the sucking mud. He went up the rope, hand-over-hand, climbing with more will than he had ever climbed in his young life before.

At the top, he swayed only for the flicker of an eye: the gangsters were crowding at the shore. He leaped down one wall of the canal, up the other, and ran for the hillside.

Somebody saw him. Somebody yelled.

A bullet whistled by his head; men ran after him; but the lad struck up the hill like a frightened rabbit. Head on into the under-brush he went, bearing slightly up stream for perhaps two hundred yards; then, hearing the crash of trampled brush behind him, he turned sharply to the right and came out again at

the canal, a fair distance above the bridge-site.

He crossed to the tow-path. There were logs here such as the one on which he had left the island. By reversing the process of that departure, could he regain his friends? He had seen a boatload perish in much that endeavour; but a log, as he had proved, could live where a boat must go over. Where was Hilegas?

Another shot buzzed near him. The pursuers had found his trail; they were at the hillfoot; evening was near, but they could see to shoot and, in the lust of the chase, they were careless of Merriweather's orders. Tony rolled to the water the log that was nearest it, shoved off, hugged tight and shut his eyes.

It was indeed the experience of the morning over again: the roaring river, the lashing spray, the wrenching current, to which, though he scarcely heeded them, were now added volleys of shots from the tow-path. A wicked eddy swung him around to the Doncaster County shore of the island—threatened to carry him into mid-stream—but, as he shot past the long, overhanging branches of a low fir, he leaped for them and hung fast, his one-log raft shooting away from under his dangling feet.

Wet through as he was, vanity sent him after his long discarded jacket and boots. These on—the only dry articles of his apparel—he made his way to the inn and, after a hurried assurance that he was not a ghost, told the Blind Man and Anna his news.

He had found them in the common-room despairing of Hilegas, considering Tony dead or deserted, ready for what next desperate move they knew not. The Blind Man was seated at the table's head, the girl at his right; the lamp burned in the centre; Tony, after one look at Anna, flung his wet, tired body into the chair that waited opposite her.

He wanted to sit beside her, but her face coldly warned him away. There had been a flash of relief at his safe return, but it ended, as he thought he could see, in a sudden memory of his matinal confession about Lottie. While the Blind Man listened grimly to Tony's story, Anna gazed across the board and beyond the speaker at the farther wall.

Was it only the memory of Lottie that affected her? That, of course—but wasn't there something more? Her slim fingers twisted in and out. A question trembled on Tony's lips. He came to the end of his narrative.

"Hilegas," said the Blind Man—he had the virtue of not under-estimating danger—"Hilegas has either not got my warning or has thought it the warning of some sort of crank."

Tony had been looking at him. Then his glance shot to Anna: she had given a little cough.

Unclasped now, her fingers were nimbly forming a short sentence in the sign-language of the deaf-and-dumb.

"Be careful! Be careful! Be careful!" they said.

"Let me think!" said the Blind Man. He sat there between them, his black goggles reflecting the rays of the lamp. Thank God he was sightless! "Don't interrupt," he pursued; "I must find a way out of this for us all."

It was the opportunity that Anna had been waiting for—and he himself had given it! Under the Blind Man's nose, her darting fingers betrayed him:

"I was angry at you this morning. I am now. You know why. But there's something more important. Can you understand me?"

Tony nodded.

"Just now," she ran on, "while he was washing up for supper"—her head indicated the Blind Man, whose pale brows were wrinkled in thought—"he took his coat off. Something made me go through his pockets. I found letters. Do you know who he is? Be careful! Don't show surprise; don't speak—*do you know who he is?*"

A chill crept down Tony's spine. Somehow, he knew that he had all along expected some such revelation as that which was now, he felt, imminent. His hands fumbled so that he could scarcely form his reply:

"He's Merriweather's cousin."

As if fearful that the silent secret would proclaim itself aloud—that her very fingers would find a betraying voice—or that those black goggles would somehow convey the sign-speech to the brain behind them, through sightless sockets and over withered nerves, Anna spelled the shaking answer:

"He is Sebastian Vink!"

CHAPTER XXIII

TREASON

THE local Man of Horrors, the ensanguined hero of all Merriweather's tales of knife and fire, of rapine and butchery: this sightless creature of infinite cunning, infinite resourcefulness, whom they had made their ally, with whom they were alone on the island! Here, seated beside them, keen to detect even the slightest irregularity of their breathing, was the remorseless, the poisonous basilisk whose shadowy figure had for so long filled Tony's dreams.

He drew away from the unclean thing. Then, by a mighty effort, he controlled himself.

"You're sure?" his fingers demanded.

She nodded.

"We mustn't let him guess that we know. He'd have to hide it: he'd probably shoot us down at the first chance."

"What are we to do?"

As well as the tumult of his mind permitted,

Tony thought. Evidently, between the days of his exploits and to-day, blindness had stricken the faithless beast; perhaps, there in the dark with his own soul, he had indeed met remorse. Tony telegraphed the suggestion to Anna.

"I don't trust him," she answered. "There are too many rewards out for him. He wouldn't dare to fight on the side of the law, for he has done too much for the law to forgive."

Yet Merriweather was clearly now in opposition—Merriweather and all the Buzzard gang!

"I have it," signalled Tony: "he never sent that word to Hilegas at all. When he went blind, they must have dropped him—they probably always hated and were afraid of him, and here was their chance. Well, he got on to this game against us, somehow—through some leak in the organization—and he cut in on his own hook. He's got some devilish scheme for forcing them out of it and scooping in all the profits for himself!"

"But how?"

"I don't know how, but I'm certain of it. We've got to pretend we don't suspect; we've got to use him to help us when they attack

again. Then I've got to get ashore and go for help—perhaps we can both go, the way I went this morning!"

Her eyes danced. "We can! And you did already find out the forces against us. In the night: oh, it ought to be possible!"

The crisp voice of the Blind Man interrupted their signalling.

"Yes," he said, speaking to them both, but looking, as is the way of the sightless, straight ahead of him; "there is no use counting any more on Hilegas. Somehow we must get to land."

The conspirators gasped. It was indeed as if their fingers had become vocal.

"There are two ways," Vink continued: "we can try to capture a boat after it has landed here—that would be hard—or else we can draw their attack to one point and then lower the bridge and run across while they're engaged at their landing." He rose, taking up the cane that had been resting across his knees. "There's still time to think." He tapped his way to the door. "Give me a few minutes in the air to listen and to use my brains," he more hopefully concluded. "I haven't failed so far—I can work it out."

They were too horrified at his revealed

identity to answer. They let him go; they heard the tap-tapping of his cane; then came silence. Anna's head sank on the table. Tony ran to the door; it was all right so far: the Blind Man was just disappearing under the trees.

"Buck up, Anna!" The lad came back and laid his hand on her shoulder.

She shook him off:

"Don't touch me!"

"But, Anna——"

"And don't call me that——"

"I'm sorry, Miss Florin——"

"After what you told me this morning!"

He ground his teeth over woman's passion for trifles: she could remember such a thing at such a time! Had his own mind been less disturbed, he might have seen some hope for himself in this mental reaction that he was condemning; but he had to think only of their lives.

"You must trust me," he said.

"I don't know whom to trust!" she answered.

"You must trust me," he doggedly repeated. "Be ready to go. It's still too light for us to make the attempt, but if—if *he* only stays out long enough, we can start."

She looked up at him, a new fear in her glance :

" How do we know what he's doing at this minute ! "

She was right : Vink must be followed. With a quick command to her to await his return, Tony darted after the Blind Man.

It was easy enough to follow, if he followed quietly. He could hear Vink passing among the trees. As silently as might be, Tony stalked him.

Vink was perhaps fifty yards ahead. He was striking toward the windlass. Tony heard the crackling of twigs ; then nothing, and then, but very low, the hooting of an owl. The Blind Man had evidently come into the open at the bridge—and either he was signalling someone ashore, or someone ashore was signalling him. Rapidly, the boy slipped to the edge of the tree-belt : there was Vink, standing by the windlass and waving a rag—waving a handkerchief : the white flag !

A figure rose on the tow-path. A pistol barked. Vink swayed and gripped his side.

Somebody—it was Merriweather—rushed to the tow-path sentinel and remonstrated with him. Vink recovered himself and began to wave his bat-like arms, crossing them before

him, raising them to this angle, to that, making——

Tony caught his breath. Vink was wig-wagging to Merriweather in the Army code. No trouble reading that!

The first sentence the lad had lost, but it brought a stare of amazement to the face of the little man to whom it was addressed. Then Tony drew nearer and, unobserved, read from behind what the astounded Merriweather was reading from the farther side of the old canal.

"I'm offering terms of surrender." That was what Vink's arms were saying. "I've got the prisoners; you've got me. But I can cut their throats—I can shoot them in the back—before you can make a landing."

His vindictiveness marred the smoothness of his transmission. He had to repeat the latter portion of the message.

Merriweather, a-tiptoe on the canal-bank, wig-wagged his short-armed answer:

"We know that. What *are* your terms?"

At least Vink's reply was snappy. "First of all, kill that damned imbecile that shot me. He can't read what I'm saying: kill him."

The sentinel was standing by Merriweather's side, gazing open-mouthed at the code which indeed he did not understand.

"All right," Merriweather signalled. "As a sign of good faith; but remember, it commits me to nothing." He addressed the sentinel. "Conrad," he said, "pick me up that stone there. The white one. So."

The fellow stooped. A knife flashed in Merriweather's hand. It buried itself in the bending man's side; his body fell limply to the tow-path; Merriweather's foot pushed it into the roaring flood below.

"Now, then," his unperturbed wig-wagging continued. He signalled a swift quotation:

> "'Nothing in his life
> Became him like the leaving it!'

Come, now. Business, please!"

Vink's arms flew up and down. "Fifty per cent. of all profits!" they demanded.

It was enough. Tony turned back among the trees. He was sick. He stumbled as blindly as, a few minutes since, he would have imagined that the Blind Man, deprived of his stick, might stumble.

The Blind Man could see!

CHAPTER XXIV

AT THE WATER'S EDGE

"ANNA—for God's sake! At once! We mustn't lose a minute!"

Tony burst into the common-room.

She had not moved since he left her. Now, with his appearance, she was on her feet, her hands clenched at her sides, her face very white. As she looked at him, her eyes widened like the eyes of a startled child.

"What is it?"

Before his answer, he swayed there, panting. So the overstrained runner in a close-contested race may know that he has himself breasted the tape and yet be ignorant of the contest's issue.

"It's now or never—that's what it is!"

"We're going?" Her voice was that of a gladness fearful of disappointment.

The disappointment came.

"Vink's not blind—he sat there and read our plan while we made it."

"But he is!"

"He's not blind, I tell you: I saw him wig-

wagging to Merriweather, down there at the shore. Merriweather thought he was blind, too; you should have seen his look of surprise. He—he's going to sell us out!"

The dying daylight was behind her, but the change in her face was too radical to be hidden. The startled child became the amazed woman.

"It can't be—— You must have——"

"I *saw* him!" Tony dragged at her. "Come on: we've got to run for it to the end of the island—and the log!"

His touch determined her. Amazement went down before the realization, and with realization came resolve. Anna snatched her rifle from the table.

"We won't need that!" cried Tony.

She put it down.

"We'll need this," she said.

She moved with a speed scornful of hurry. She opened a drawer and took out a silver brandy-flask bearing Merriweather's monogram. She tucked it in her torn blouse.

"Now!"

Hand in hand among the protecting trees, stumbling over unregarded roots, taking no pains to avoid the noise of their progress, they ran toward the island's lower end. Once she choked:

"He'll hear us if we go so fast!"

Tony answered:

"He'll be after us if we don't!"

Breath came short. They almost fell at the water's edge—they almost fell against the spare form of Sebastian Vink.

Had they had a glance to spare, they would have seen that he had been busily engaged in rolling every available log out of their planned way and into the snarling current. To that task the noise of their approach set a period. Vink awaited the fugitives; now he covered them with an unerring pistol.

His goggles were gone. In their place there radiated a pair of steel-grey eyes more horrible than the false black tokens of blindness that once had hidden them. They were cold; they held the malignancy of a venomous reptile.

"I expected you," he said. His thin mouth was twisted into a smile through which his yellow teeth flashed in the afterglow of the sunset like the fangs of a wolf.

His weapon was superrogatory. Their sheer amazement would have effected as well the runaways' arrest.

Vink continued:

"Tear up your petticoat, my girl, and dress this scratch in my side. I want to look pre-

sentable for our visitors: cousin Merriweather will be along just as soon as he's transmitted my terms to his fellow-members of the Board of Directors. We've had a family reconciliation. You know that, Tortona: I heard you behind me all the time that I was signalling."

Anna looked appealingly at Tony.

"You must," the boy whispered huskily.

Vink ripped open coat and shirt, both now wet and reddened. He disclosed an ugly flesh-wound just below the ribs on his left side. He winced a little as Anna's trembling fingers touched him.

Women, Tony reflected—as many a man has reflected before that day and since—are queer creatures. Vink reeled ever so little—and Anna produced the brandy-flask.

"Drink this," she said.

The ivory-white talons of the wounded man's free hand waved it angrily away.

"It isn't drugged."

Pain clenched his teeth; but, holding the pistol steady, Vink repeated his gesture of refusal.

"If you don't drink some brandy," the girl expostulated, "you'll be sure to faint."

Vink's weapon had not wavered.

Tony cried:

"Then, for God's sake, throw away the brandy and let him faint, can't you?"

Their captor kept his eyes on Tony, but addressed the girl. He said a strange thing, an echo, as it at first seemed to them, of that character of the Blind Man which they took it he had now wholly repudiated:

"I would never let the Demon Rum enter my mouth—not if it sent me to prison to keep my lips closed—not if it cost me my life!"

Incredible: among all his crimes, the man held fast to abstinence—careless of murder, careless of all the abominations that he lived by, he remained the sincere Prohibitionist! Tony fancied himself close to destruction; he feared still more for Anna; yet he laughed aloud at the revelation.

"Then save the liquor," he commented bitterly; "we'll never have any use for it, but his cousin will."

"Throw it into the river," said Vink, and, when he had been obeyed: "As soon as we've finished here, we'll go back to the house—there won't be a drop of that cursed stuff left in the old tavern by the time that sot returns. Now then"—he turned to Tony—"you know who I am; if you are to persuade this young lady to do what I shall want her to do, you

had better know who you are : you are *Georgie Keppel.*"

"*What?*" mocked Tony. "Again?" But there was a queer catch in his throat : unmasked, Sebastian Vink carried conviction.

"Always," said Vink.

He leaned against a tree. He lowered the pistol to a more comfortable position, but he kept his trigger-finger at the spot of vantage and, with the weapon, motioned his audience of two to stand before him. The stage thus set, he rapidly told them the truth of the Keppel Case.

CHAPTER XXV

SEBASTIAN VINK

For a conjunction against which time and lethal events pressed so imperatively, the history was long. He who had been the Blind Man furnished forth no more than its bare outline; the whole company of its details can never now be reassembled; only this much is indubious:

All those years gone, when the elder Keppel flourished on his estate in transmural Leeds, Sebastian Vink took in hand the ruin of his house. Kidnapping for ransom was the intent; the end was that of this present chronicle.

Under Vink's direction, then, the favourably known Merriweather and Maria his wife, assisted by the man called Conrad—the man whose murdered body hurtled, even at the moment of Vink's telling, toward the Chesapeake—lured Keppel's son and heir into their covered wagon. Followed what has already been told.

At the last stage of the subsequent negotiations, the Merriweathers proceeded with Vink to Americus, there to leave the boy and collect the money, according to agreement; but, just as Merriweather laid hands on the reward, the presence of the detectives was discovered. Vink seized the child.

It was a black night and stormy. In the immediate confusion, the ways of the fleeing kidnappers separated, and Merriweather decided that his should never again cross that of his chief. He had the money and was sure that he was unknown; to Vink, on the other hand, he had called out that the latter was recognized. It was inspiration. Martin esteemed that, through its effect, he would ensure his own safety and his own fortune: that, if Vink believed his participation known, this master of the enterprise would not dare return—would believe the police to be holding his identity secret only to induce him to seek his old retreats and court capture. And on much such an hypothesis Vink did indeed soon begin to act: he robbed the fresh grave of a child in the Morgantown cemetery, conveyed the mutilated contents to the foot of the old oak on New Island and, whereas Merriweather

had been cautiously commissioned to attend to all the preliminary correspondence, himself wrote, from Harrisburg, the final letter to the elder Keppel. It was all in character: Merriweather rested on the apparent truth of his assumption and, with his wife, settled to the enjoyment of old Keppel's stolen and unsatisfied reward.

Little, however, do we know the souls of our friends—even of those who are our friends in the solid intimacy of a common crime. Sebastian Vink had the virtue of the Bourbon character without its weakness: he never forgave and he never forgot; but he could combine prudence with revenge and patience with ambition. Rather, in his war with life, he belonged to the Napoleonic Guard and era: he might die——he would never really surrender. He meant now to open negotiations after a few quieting years, on his own account and so to direct them—if that did not involve money-loss or personal danger—as to pay his score against Merriweather. He planned so much delay as would slacken the footfalls and still the voices practising in the current hue and cry; a delay that he did not foresee was provided by the sole word which the pen of chance contributed to the entire history.

With little George in a stolen buggy, he was faring toward a hiding-place in the wilder woods of Pike County, when their vehicle incontinently collided with a trolley-car near Doncaster and overturned. Vink feared close scrutiny: he had to run. The boy, tossed over a fence, was unhurt and, as the chagrined kidnapper observed from the first ready hiding-place, was picked up by two passers-by: Tortona, an Italian labourer, and his wife, newly arrived in this country and tramping to Stonington, where the man was to work in the quarries.

A second kidnapping would be too risky; cautious investigation convinced Vink that the Tortonas were honest folk, who would not be corrupted into a partnership; Sebastian could but watch. The neighbourhood was sequestered, its people not well informed; Mrs. Tortona had lost a son, about George's age, on the voyage from Italy: she brought Georgie up as her own.

Vink had other irons in the fire, and tended them. Nevertheless, for most of the succeeding years, he kept in touch with Stonington and Doncaster, knowing that, when he did go farther afield, the boy was in safe hands. The

elder Tortona died; Tony dispatched himself to college and supported himself there; but Vink waited: he was prospering well enough in his secondary ventures, and the more Tony progressed—the more Anna Florin, over in Leeds, became habituated to the pleasant uses of her stepfather's fortune—the larger swelled the prospects of ultimate blackmail.

War spares none of us. The world-conflict interfered as impartially in evil plans as in good, and Sebastian's suffered along with many a better and some, it may be, worse; but Vink could not afford to accept the Army's report of Tony's demise. He made a quiet, systematic hospital-search and found the veritable heir, his memory gone, at Camp Dix.

There and then, the searcher said naught. He hunted up Martin, came to him pretending to be blind and broken; asked for money to escape to China; hinted threats of exposure, and told, with apparent casualness, how, just before losing his sight, he had come across Shellshock Case No. 27—a false likeness, he craftily insisted, yet one which, with the contributory evidence still in Martin's hands, might, but for Vink's physical incapacitation, have been easily palmed off as the Keppel boy.

Merriweather had long since exhausted the

ransom; and Vink guessed as much and knew how the little man would act: he would give the Blind Man a paltry sum to go away, and then, for himself, would make the most of the opportunities presented by the supposedly fraudulent George Keppel. Martin would run all the risks and would be the readier to share the reward if he believed Tony an impostor and thought that a reappearing Vink might expose him. When the boy was safe in Martin's hands, Vink would indeed return and claim his share—or take the whole.

Much fell out as designed. The claiming of No. 27 was a mere holiday-task for ease: there was used the readily obtained name of a soldier reported missing, whose home was distant and whose parents were dead since '17; the authorities assented to secrecy, on the plea that publicity regarding the boy's loss of memory might hurt his future business career.

Concealed from both Martin and No. 27, Vink followed to Long Level. He wrote Anna in order to have both birds in the nest and to decide which was the better plucking; he even wrote to Hilegas: an anchor to windward; if things did not proceed propitiously

and swiftly—well, Vink had saved a bit of money, but old age stole forward on its velvet paws: if necessary, he would revenge himself on Merriweather by selling his cousin in return for a life-pension.

Thus, in the last fading light of day, he who had been the Blind Man told his story, and there was no doubting the essential truth of what he said. Overhead, above the natural clearing that abutted the island's edge, the sky paled to pink. Twilight is always quietly, but effectually, revolutionary; of this one the final glow illuminated the lad and the girl, standing as if they were convicted prisoners arraigned for sentence before some topsy-turvy bar of justice, and left Sebastian Vink, grey and black, batlike and corpselike, in the rôle of the cynically smiling Jeffreys.

He came to his arrival at the island.

A glance, he said, through darkened glasses, at Tony in restored health certified that here was no lad to dispossess, rightly or wrongly, of a girl with whom he was manifestly in love. Vink leered.

Tony felt the warm blood rise to his cheeks; he durst not look at Anna. She knew that she blushed, and dared not look at him.

Soon, Vink went on, Merriweather announced that the lady would not purchase silence. Thereat Sebastian secretly determined on appealing to her for the pension: he would get the Merriweathers out of the way and effect a rescue before Hilegas arrived: that would strengthen his claim for reward. Upon this decision he was acting when Anna, locking him up, spoiled all their separate chances. Now nothing remained save a truce with Merriweather and a quick compulsion of Anna, through Tony, toward the path of compensation for the entire gang.

Thus, verbatim, he put it:

"I had to get those Merriweathers ashore, make terms with the pair of you and clear out before my dear cousins came back—if I didn't want to hold out for Hilegas's arrival, and Hilegas, it has turned out, is delayed. Well, rum helped me there: the only time the red devil was any good to me. That little girl—Ellie: drink made Martin hit her too hard. I found that out and told him it wouldn't do to have her body discovered on the island. I sent him and his wife ashore to bury it."

Vink chuckled; the corners of his thin mouth were jerked toward the crowsfeet that

pointed to the corners of his sunken eyes. For the first time since he had begun his explanation, one of his prisoners spoke. From Tony there burst:

"He killed her?"

"Rum made him hit her," chuckled Vink; "Rum the angry. And Rum made him think he'd done for her: Rum the deceiver. I was nosing around; I found her body in a bag: she was only unconscious; I locked her in one of the unused bedrooms—told her to keep quiet and remember, when the time came, who'd saved her. If she died, I wasn't any worse off; if things went wrong, I'd have somebody to speak for me. One of the upstair rooms. She may be alive yet—I don't know."

Tony sprang up.

"Sit down!" his new master commanded.

"But you haven't anything to gain by letting that child——"

"She can't help me now." Vink raised the pistol. "You are in for it, and you have only yourself to blame. If you hadn't locked me in that closet, you'd have only me to deal with—and to buy. Now you have Merriweather and all the rest.

"I filled that bag with a weighted dummy. I knew he'd look in it before he buried it—that sort would have to—but I thought I'd have time to arrange matters with you two before he did. Well, you held me here; I've had to make terms with him." Vink shrugged his scrawny shoulders. "Take the consequences. Martin found out the truth and collected the gang. Take the consequences, I say."

There was a line of silence; then Vink himself crossed it. He turned to Anna, who stood, her hands clasped before her, her face white, her blue eyes staring as only blue eyes can.

"There were just two ways that this fellow could have been of use to us;" he said, with a nod toward Tony; "to produce him as a claimant—which nobody but a rum-dum idiot like Martin would have tried to do after one talk with the boy—or else to hold him over you—to make you cough, Miss Florin." Again he smiled his narrow smile. "Martin tried that: you wouldn't see it his way. So now our friend Georgie"—Vink's voice grew dry—"must most likely be got rid of. Hilegas isn't coming: that's clear. As soon as Merriweather gets his men together and

lands here on the island, we shall arrange things : if you don't want little Georgie to die, my dear, and if you want your own liberty, use his own money to save him—you will have to go to Leeds with a couple of us and hand over a tidy sum. Martin and I will stick by you in your house there until you've negotiated enough of your securities to make it worth while to let you go ; I should say about half the Keppel estate would do us, Miss Florin. And it *is* his own money, you know."

He horribly grimaced ; he leaned forward ; he put out the yellow talons of his free hand to touch her cheek. The other hand still held the pistol in Tony's direction ; but that Tony could no longer heed. Those evil fingers on this shrinking flesh : it was too much. He flung himself headlong at his captor.

Anna shrieked. The pistol exploded and flew out of Vink's grasp.

Then Tony felt the skinny figure tighten under him ; an amazing strength manifested itself. Tony was pushed toward the water—was shoved into it. This hold he lost, that was loosened ; strange holds were taken of him : he knew—had heard of it—*jiu-jitsu*. He——

He was lifted, like a baby, on the shoulders of his weak antagonist, and hurled out—out beyond the bit of calm water—out into the roaring current, on the way to join the murdered Conrad.

CHAPTER XXVI

AT THE THUNDERBOLT'S END

Abrahamd Hilegas, Attorney-at-Law, appears only by second-hand in the concluding incidents of the Long Level Tragedy, and not to his advantage: he failed to come to the beleaguered islanders' rescue.

Nevertheless, as he is still a respected practitioner of his profession at the York County Bar, any resumé of the truth about the Keppel C se owes him an explanation. Those were the months immediately following the Armistice, when the energies of the Administration in Washington were chiefly concerned with peace negotiations at Paris, and when wartime loot and disorganization still held to their unimpeded course at home. Along with everything else, the mail-service suffered: Mr. Hilegas never received Sebastian Vink's letter of warning until two days after the ultimate catastrophe had wiped out Cross Keys Tavern.

It was another crime, and a minor one, that had sent Sgt. Nick Haltspan and his mounted

detachment of three State Policemen—Peter Peepell, Adam Hess and Tom Davis—from Leeds to Delta by the route behind the hills. It was Trooper Peepell's desire to hurry home to Doncaster that had persuaded Haltspan, their assigned mission accomplished, to order a return by the shorter road, along the old tow-path; and it was Trooper Hess's affection for his mare—an affection that manifested itself in a regular ration of oats in excess of orders—which spurred that animal and her rider some distance in advance of the rest of the party and, thus separating him from the sound of their voices, opened his ears to cries from the river.

Tony Tortona, now George Keppel, had been washed three desperate miles downstream —battered against a rock ten yards from shore —lost consciousness. Somehow, however, he clung to his single chance of safety. When he came again to his senses, he yelled for help —more out of instinct than from any trust in being heard—but Adam Hess did hear him.

A rope dragged him ashore, not badly hurt, but too exhausted to tell his story. A precious, an irrecoverable, half-hour was sacrificed in bringing him to.

"Hurry—for God's sake, hurry!"

Those were his first words: his explanation stumbled on their heels. And "Hurry—for God's sake, hurry!" he kept repeating as, flung dripping on the squad's single remount, he urged that horse abreast of Adam Hess's, and the little cavalcade went tearing through the breakneck dark.

He had been long on the rock. The night was late. What had happened—what might *not* have happened—at New Island?

"*Hurry—for God's sake, hurry!*"

His cracked voice kept up the automatic repetition. The hoofs of the frightened animals—rearing now, now stumbling, sometimes falling outright among the litter of loose stones, but always urged foaming onward—themselves beat out that refrain.

The moon had risen weakly, a vast circle about her, but only at the most infrequent intervals did her light penetrate the branches that, at this section of the tow-path, locked fingers overhead. Mostly, it was blackness which enveloped them: a solid wall, which rattled back their clatter like some deafening machine-gun fusillade. Great as was their velocity, Tony's whole soul raced ahead of it, and yet, from either hand, sharp impressions,

brief, but vivid, struck him as if they were rebounding bullets.

This mouldering canal: how long it seemed since he had first encountered it, that white afternoon at Blunstonville! Days; but interminable days, all shadow—until yesterday. Years of his life had been packed into them; and now:

"*Hurry!*"

There was rain in the air: his dilated nostrils could smell it. He thrust out one hand, palm upward, as his horse tore through an open space. No—not yet. It only threatened. The atmosphere was his army-helmet, constricting his temples: there was thunder coming. . . .

"*Hurry—for God's sake!*"

His horse heaved under him. Now, from up-stream, through the dense forest of the precipitous hills, there fanned his sweating face a light breeze, lifeless, ominously warm. It heralded the brooding tempest; it whispered evil. In the woods there must be, could one hear it, a flutter of alarmed birds and the terror of four-footed folk, who can read the skies.

A frightful roar of thunder. It scuttled down the Susquehanna. Its flanks split

against the hills; but the wide waterway was an unobstructed vehicle of sound: its centre unhampered for miles and miles, the full force of the blast howled by on Tony's right. A double darkness descended.

"*Hurry!*"

Like the ripping of the Temple Curtain from its top downward, a shaft of forked lightning sputtered across the sky. A gust of cold wind; a green vision of lashed trees; a glimpse of the road that frightened his horse and made its rider wonder how they had come safely even thus far. Then night again, all ebony, and the tumbling of the thunder behind them on its race to the Bay.

A great drop hit Tony's cheek, cool among the runnels of hot sweat. Another and another. Then, in a cataract, the rain poured over the galloping squadron. It hissed threats in their ears; it questioned and answered among the swishing leaves.

"*Hurry!*"

They *must* be near the lock by now!

"*Hurry!*"

What if they were to pass it in the dark?

But no. At that instant, another blazing bolt clove the heavens, illuminating them from

horizon to horizon. They were there: they were crashing upon their destination.

Tony saw the white tavern stand revealed, its chimneys dancing, figures running away from it. His ears were killed by a tremendous explosion. A sheet of apocalyptic flame threw its menace against the midnight sky: the lightning had struck the inn.

This he saw—and, in the same flash, he saw that somebody had amazedly seen him and the troopers in his wake.

Their attack had been perfect. The brigands were in occupation of the island; but they had left one sentinel on the tow-path, and her the State Policemen's storm-screened onslaught overwhelmingly surprised.

Her! The giantess Maria tottered, facing Tony's rearing horse and crowded by the rush of it into a bare foot of space between the animal and the centre-edge of the rotting lock.

It was the briefest compound fraction of recordable time. He looked from the tavern to the woman, and yet he saw her vast bulk pitch toward the lock-edge above that portion where, if she fell, the sucking mud at the bottom must, so soon after the afternoon's heat, infallibly engulf and strangle her—— No such salvation as had been his could now

be hers. He saw her recover herself and pitch toward his horse's pawing hoofs—saw them beat the air above her grotesquely bonneted head—saw that habitually immobile face change to an expression of panic-agony that, survive as long as he might, he would never be able to forget—saw her huge mouth open.

. . .

There came from it, battering against his dead ears, a terrific scream.

Tony wrenched his bridle. He himself was sickeningly near that precipice. He wrenched again.

It was too late. The steel-shod hoofs struck her.

The horse and its rider swerved to momentary safety; but, either dead or on a dash down to death by suffocation, the mighty body of the giantess plunged headlong over the lock-side to the hungry mud below.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE DEATH AT THE BRIDGE

THE ogress was beyond rescue. Terrible as had been her death, this was no time to investigate it. The troopers flung free of their saddles and, pistols drawn, rushed to that gorge at the base of which the fatal millrace howled. Tony hurled himself after them.

Across the water, at the crest of the island's rising ground, the tavern towered, a single sheet of lurid flame. It was like a moving-picture screen erected against the walls of the night, and on it was projected a group of hurrying silhouettes: men who hustled in their midst two figures, a young woman's and a little girl's, forward, toward the unsuspected audience—toward the bridge.

For the bridge was down. Tony clutched Haltspan's arm and pointed.

Speech was well-nigh useless. The storm had suspended, settling to a morose and grumbling gloom; but the wind remained angry, the river's eternal and violent reson-

ance became a bellow of complaint against the lashing it had suffered, the devouring pyrotechny that consumed the inn shouted at its meal and, riding the combined cacaphony, as vaulting sparks and hissing brands rode the conflagration, there sounded, high and clear, the shriek of the woman and the piercing wail of the child.

Haltspan saw Tony's gesture and understood. He motioned to his three troopers: all the riders dismounted and turned toward the bridge.

At that moment, a slight shift of the wind bent the sheet of flame on the island above the fugitives' heads and toward the York County shore; the attackers were wrapped in its radiance—and Vink saw them.

He raised a bat-like arm and pointed. Two of his men, one of them armed with an axe, came running toward the windlass: Adam Hess was already astride of the recumbent pole.

The man with the axe lifted it; it shone like silver. His companion brushed him aside and started to turn the windlass.

"Stop that!" yelled Haltspan. "Stop, or we'll shoot!"

They could not hear him, but there was no

misapprehending the significance of his raised automatic. Yet they gestured derision; both men bent to the handle.

"Jump, Hess—jump!"

Haltspan might as well have whispered into the blast of a cannonade. Hess had lowered his head, so that even his eyes failed to admonish him. The bridge sprang upward; its startled occupant lost his hold and vanished into the millrace.

Haltspan fired: there was no sound of the shot, but one of the brigands fell across the windlass. His companion, without interruption of his labours, kicked the body away and, by a final turn, brought the bridge to the perpendicular.

Haltspan fired again.

And Peepell.

Too late: the pole was locked, erect.

Then the pistol of Davis, the other trooper, laid the corpse of the second gangster beside his completed work.

Tony's burning eyes had been on the hesitant group before the inn: hesitant for an instant only. He saw them scamper, heads bent, toward the upstream end of the island, and he realized Vink's purpose: a boat must have succeeded in landing there; the gang-

leader meant to escape, with his followers, by that—to escape and, with Anna and Ellie for hostages, bargain, from some safe retreat, for his own and his remaining comrades' safety.

A boat: but, now that the bridge was gone, why not bargain from the island?

There could be one reason only: there must be some way by which the police could cross. Then Tony remembered: the gangsters at the lock-edge that afternoon had spoken of boats —the plural. Vink, aboard a boat, might escape any craft that followed him; remaining on the island, he would endure the heavier hazard of being captured by means of any craft that he had left ashore. There must be such a craft at hand.

And Tony found it. After a choking search, he found it in a tiny cove, a quarter of a mile upstream—a Hampton, wide, solid, fitted with a motor and stocked with three great cans of gasoline. Panting back, he communicated his discovery to Haltspan: within five minutes, the remaining rescuers were pushing off.

The Sergeant bent to the motor-crank.

"How many of them are they?" he asked: the noise was less here.

"There are the two girls and Vink and Merri-

weather, and "—Tony lashed his memory—"I think there were ten men."

"Two dead now, anyway: that's ten fighters and the pair of prisoners—a big load. We have a chance." He had started cranking.

Tom Davis was wading knee-deep, shoving at the prow. "If they haven't got too good a start of us," he said.

Minutes had been lost—and seconds were invaluable. Haltspan still toiled at the crank.

Tony was in an agony of delay. "What's wrong?"

"This motor; it won't——"

"Never mind the motor!"

But just then it began chugging. Davis gave another shove and scrambled aboard. They swung out of the quiet water and into the current. The boat spun round—was caught—hurled forward.

"The tiller!" cried Tony as Haltspan started astern and was thrown flat by the twist of the boat in the grip of the water. "Watch the tiller!" The Sergeant recovered himself; he took the tiller. "Keep her out: there are rocks here!"

But to go toward midstream appeared to involve cutting diagonally across a mighty flux.

The boat trembled, stood still, edged to starboard.

"Keep her *out!*" pleaded Tony.

"I—I can't," gasped Haltspan. "She won't answer——"

She did. Some fluke in the river came to their assistance. They shot directly toward the Doncaster County shore, then turned as suddenly at right-angles and were sent hurdling toward the Bay.

On their right, the old inn burned like tinder, but all ahead of them was darkness.

Did that darkness hold their quarry? Did it hold Ellie? Did it hold Anna still safe?

The pursuit had begun.

CHAPTER XXVIII

PURSUIT

THE roof of the tavern fell as they rushed by the island. It fell with a rending scream that terminated in a deep detonation, and a hundred torches shot upward: they might have been the crimes committed there, whipped Heavenward for judgment.

The boat swept on.

Now the island was behind the rescuers.

Now it was lost to sight. Everything was lost to sight in that ponderous atrament which precedes the dawn.

New sounds added themselves to the hubbub of the river, the cough of the motor, the devil-voices of the wind: the crash of the boat's bow as, spurred by current and her own power, she leaped from wave to wave, from eddy to vortex; the protests of her timbers; the oaths of Haltspan and Davis, now both straining at the tiller and straining, for the most part, in vain.

Tony crouched and clung above the prow.

Spray covered him; but his eyes bored the night.

Had the quarry landed? It was not likely: they would want to go far.

Had they already been passed by? They had had too long a start for that.

But would they, then, be overtaken? Worse yet: had they left the island before this supposititious pursuit began? Had they left it at all? What reasons, save those born of fallible deduction, existed for assuming their intent to run away?

As if his own strength were urging the boat forward, and as if that strength were failing, Tony's heart battered at his ribs. His breath came short and dry; his throat ached.

If he could only see! Would the dawn never come? . . .

It came at last. The eastern sky paled; blue lights flickered on the water. Sunrise there was none; but, slowly, the low-suspended vault turned grey above a stretch of grey river and grey hills: the weather had not yet "settled"; there would be more rain.

They were nearing the Chesapeake. Very far to right and left the colourless waters extended, bordered by the now low hills, all colourless. Little islands dotted the broad

stream, but the velocity of its current was unabated by its width, and it was deserted.

" Where is my wandering boy to-night,
The boy of my pride and joy? "

It was an accordion: in the moment of flight, Vink had remembered his instrument of solace! And it was Vink's voice—the voice that had sounded that evening from the moonlit tow-path, now the voice of a man so satisfied with the success of his precautions as to find expression for vicarious sentimentality.

The lee of a small island had hidden the runaways' boat: Tony could see it now, not half-a-mile ahead. The wide path of foam in its wake rose and fell before him. It was heading straight downstream with all the rapidity that current and motor could provide.

Haltspan saw it, too—and saw something beside.

" Look ahead! " he ordered. " See those clouds? She's running—we're all running—into as pretty a squall as ever came off the Bay! "

He was right. Toward them, up the channel and, as it seemed, sweeping the way as it went, charged a compact mass of blackness. It galloped forward with a speed equal

to that with which both boats were plunging to meet it.

But Tony's eyes were just then for the boat that he had almost despaired of. He saw that it was crowded: three men at the tiller; Vink propped against the midrail; Merriweather, evidently a little seasick, wilting on the musician's shoulder, and a trio of other brigands huddled close by—the two unaccounted for must either have died by the lightning-stroke that doomed the inn, or else perished in the subsequent fire.

Unobserved by any, the lowering squall swept forward.

Where were Anna and Ellie?

At peril of being tossed overboard, Tony rose. Yes, he saw them: they were lying wrapped in shawls on the boat's bottom.

"Where is my wandering——"

"Sit down!" Haltspan commanded. The squall drew nearer. "We don't want them to see us before they have to—*sit down!*"

One of the men at the fugitives' tiller let go and pointed backward. The music stopped; Vink carefully laid aside his accordion. The pursuers had been sighted.

Haltspan surrendered his post to the sole administrations of Davis and clambered aft. He pushed Tony to one side; he made a megaphone of his palms.

"Put ashore and surrender, and we won't shoot!" he called.

Vink was more mindful of his well-being than his rival commander; he had up two of his men to support him before he answered. His words came booming back across the troubled waters:

"What—are—your—terms?"

"Let me get him!" pleaded Peepell. "It was him was responsible for poor Adam Hess's death!"

"Terms?" echoed Tony. "Anything for the girls' lives. If you'll only——"

But Haltspan placed a broad palm on his mouth. He kept looking beyond Vink, at the gathering darkness of the storm.

"Nothing of the kind!" he shouted. Then, to Tony: "Shut up! He don't dare kill his one chance—an' if he did dare, those other crooks wouldn't let him. Shut up, I say: I'm boss here!" He turned ever so slightly to Peepell, whose right hand itched above an automatic: "That goes for you, too." Finally he faced Vink again: "These

are our terms : if you don't do as we say, we'll shoot ! "

Vink's answer was instantaneous. At a sharp command, the unoccupied gangster hustled the two girls to their feet and held them, standing, between the pursuers and all of the pursued except those at the helm. Through this living bulwark, Vink's voice sounded :

" Then—it—will be—your women—that—get hurt ! "

Tony tugged at the hand that attempted to block his speech : " Let them go ! "

Peepell pleaded : " Aw, let me get him, Sarge ! "

The squall was almost there.

Haltspan had a flicker of hesitation. Tony felt his hand tremble ; Peepell bent forward.

" For God's sake——" muttered Tony.

" We—won't—change—our terms ! " called Haltspan.

" Then—go—to—Hell ! " shrieked Vink—and a pistol barked, and a shot ripped by the two men in the police-boat's prow.

Haltspan's bluff had been called. He opened his mouth for tardy conciliation—and the squall, which he had for an instant forgotten, and the approach of which this col-

loquy had hidden from the gangsters, broke first on their boat, and then engulfed that of their enemies.

The Sergeant and Tony fell together, but the latter was at once partially upright. Regardless of his own craft, he watched, with breathless suspense, the boat that bore Anna.

Everybody aboard it was hanging fast to whatever promised safety. Tony would never have thought that any craft could pitch so and survive. Her bows lunged into the waves, tossing spray yards high; she shipped incredible quantities of water. Now only her lower sides were visible—now he seemed to see daylight under her. Then she would poke her nose against a hill of dark glass, stagger to its tufted peak and shoot down the farther side like a toboggan, a mass of foam and bubbles behind her, and nothing more to be seen.

"That's the end——"

"*That* is——"

"She *can't* survive this time!"

Again and again, he gave her up for lost. He sought for something to toss to the forms that must soon, with only one chance for life in a thousand, be thrashing the water.

He saw the woman and girl, clinging together, thrown from side to side in the

bottom of the uprearing boat. He saw one big, bearded man who clasped his hands as if in prayer. A consumptive fellow, one of those at the tiller, had raised his face to Heaven and was crying. Merriweather had his fluffy white head in his delicate hands; but Vink sat upright, with his thin lips pressed tightly together, his face the face of a pursued but as yet unbeaten bird of prey.

"They've got to lighten boat somehow!" shouted Haltspan in Tony's ear. "She can't go on like that another quarter-mile!"

CHAPTER XXIX

"THE DEVIL HIMSELF"

EVIDENTLY there came to Vink at that same moment the realization that they were overweighted. The storm encircled them; they were at its centre, and one ominous swirling cloud of brown curled round and round their craft. It was flecked with foam; it seemed to have a vague, gigantic form and to move with an evil life of its own. Its edge touched Vink's tossing locks of grey. He bent toward the now upturned, but still pallid face of Merriweather.

In obedience to some command, Merriweather whipped out a pistol and covered the men at the helm; at his pantomimic order, they lashed it. Immediately, Vink drew his automatic, threatened the gangsters amidships and, with his other claw, pointed over the side.

He was enjoining them to jump: to jump, with nothing but death in the raging waters around them.

"I can't stand this!" cried Peepell.

"Put down your gun!" snapped Haltspan.

Aboard the brigands' boat there were gestures of remonstrance. There was a panic-cry. But they were clearly unarmed, those men—their leaders, in view of the possibility of just some such climax as this, must, hours ago, have managed to gain possession of their weapons.

The brown cloud swirled around them like an evil spirit; high above the other boat, theirs rose on a great wave. Against it they were all outlined like lofty figures in a fresco: the women huddling tight to the farther side, the threatened men's faces contorted by rage and fear; Merriweather white, but resolute, and Vink, his pistol ruthlessly levelled, his black cloak flapping, smiling there as if he were a deadly condor poised directly above them.

That pistol spewed fire—once—twice—three times.

Two men pitched overboard. One, the bearded man that had been praying, jumped. A fourth, the consumptive, lurched and fell amidships, and him Vink lugged to the side and pushed—a mere push did it—through the curling cloud, into the clamorous water.

As he did so, the other three made a rush

for their chief: Merriweather fired into their backs, and they, too, were tossed to the river. One of them—Tony recalled him as another member of the trio at the tiller—could not have been badly hurt. He bobbed to the boiling surface and clutched the rail: a knife in Vink's hand slashed the fellow's fingers, and he sank.

The cloud revolved. Through it, white spray shot in and out like serpents that hissed and writhed.

"I can't *stand* it!" wailed Peepell again.

It was all over in a pair of seconds. When the semi-transparent cloud lifted a little, there was nobody afloat for the pursuers to rescue. In the pitching murder-craft were visible only Vink, Merriweather and the women, the last two lying again, almost awash, at the bottom of the boat.

Thus terribly lightened, the fleeing thing sprang forward. But there was something—or somebody—else aboard her now. The brown cloud, still revolving, contracted its circle—seemed to settle on her; and certainly, invoked by Vink from the storm that howled around, there was aboard her the rusty-coloured Devil of Murder. He still had work to do.

Merriweather, probably shaken not so much by what he had just done to others as by what might so easily, in the doing, have happened to himself, sank on the after-thwart, reached feebly to a hip-pocket and, producing a flask, put it to his trembling, rosebud mouth. Vink, in the twirling brown mist, turned upon him.

Was it to rid himself of a final encumbrance, to dispose of the last awkward accomplice?

Was it, indeed, as it pretended, a flash of that fanatic flame which is eager to burn men's bodies for their souls' salvation?

Or was the act decreed by the demon of blood-lust that he had so lately and fatally raised? The appetite of sudden murder is never sated, masters them that indulge it, grows by that it feeds upon. Was this which Vink now did the last cynic-jeer against the cousins to be launched by the Prince of the Powers of the Air?

"You promised me you wouldn't touch it —you swore I'd thrown the last drop away!"

His voice, gone shrill, pierced the bulwarks of the storm. Tony saw him through that cloud of brown which encircled him: his aquiline nose aquiver; his thin lips shaken by the accusations, the condemnation, that tore across them; his whole lean body electrified.

"Now you've got to erase your offence. Expiation! The blood-atonement! There's only one thing can wipe the liquor-curse and that broken oath from those lips for ever: your life—*your life, Martin!*"

Merriweather had been looking at him with an apologetic smile: less than a minute ago, he rescued from three of the crew this relative to whom, for all his own fitful masterfulness and cunning, he had always been a slave; perhaps he thought that rescue would excuse one drink more. At all events, he saw his mistake soon enough: saw it written in the exalted frenzy that lowered darkly above him. His cotton-topped poll went back; the smile froze on his tiny mouth. Then Vink's pistol, clapped to the Little Man's forehead, fired for the last time, and fixed that smile on the rose-bud lips for ever.

For the last time, Vink's automatic had spoken. As the bird, frightened by the serpent and hating it, but lured in its direction, Trooper Peepell had been creeping fascinatedly forward in the pursuing boat. The sound of that shot broke the spell of the snake and shattered the habit of discipline: Peepell's pistol cracked as if it had been the echo of the other's.

The arch-murderer turned, rose to his full height. His arms spread wide, the dark cloak flapping from them, the yellow talons clawing the brown mist. The eyes so long thought blind blazed with a poison finally impotent; the thin mouth was jerked upward in a paralytic grin—and, as the whirling cloud, or the Spirit that was in it, fled upward from the boat, Sebastian Vink fell dead across the body of his ultimate victim. . . .

They had flung a rope, shouted orders to Anna and towed the death-craft to the Cecil County shore of Maryland, beside the railroad-tracks that run there. Sgt. Haltspan, consulting his wrist-watch, was wondering if they were too late to flag the early morning train from Port Deposit to Americus.

"I hope we kin," said Trooper Peter Peepell—he was a normal citizen again, the apparent policeman—afraid of his wife. "I'm a Leeds man, like Tom Davis here," he explained to the company in general, "but me and the missus, we're livin' in Doncaster, an' I want to git there's quick's possible: this here's my day-off by rights, an' I'll be married just a month this noon: Lottie's finicky about our keepin' anniversaries."

Tony had been holding himself aloof, fearing to approach near to the dripping figure of Anna, more beautiful than ever in the moment of her rescue, the towsie head of Ellie pressed against her thigh. At Peepell's mention of a Lottie, however, he rushed to the Trooper.

"What was your wife's maiden name?" he breathlessly demanded.

Peter blinked at him. "Why, Lichtenwalner," he answered.

"Are—are you *sure?*"

"What do you mean—'sure'? Of course I am!"

Tony fell to pumping the recent bridegroom's hand.

"Congratulations!" he cried in hysteric laughter. "Congratulations! Congratulations!"

"Here!" Peter jerked his hand away. "What the——"

"It's all right," interrupted Tony. "I knew your wife before you did, and——"

"Well," cut in Peter belligerently, "she thinks the world o' me, I kin tell you!"

"And so do I!" shouted Tony. "I can't ever tell you how much I owe you—for my rescue: you and Haltspan and Davis, too, of course." Then a horrid thought struck him:

the Army—the problem of his discharge had still to be reckoned with. "Say, do you happen to be an ex-Service man?"

"Bet your life I am: Seventy-ninth——"

"Discharged?"

"Certainly I'm discharged."

"Come over here a minute."

Tony drew him away. His mother—for she would always be that, be he who he might—was Mrs. Tortona well? Peter knew her—reassured him—and Tony realized that he would see her before the setting of that day's sun. Then, but then only, followed a brief, yet earnest colloquy on the matter of the discharge, from which both men returned grinning. Peepell summed up his advice in a single phrase that, a week later, proved thoroughly sound:

"Shellshock: that'll explain everything; you had it; they all fall for it—they did with me."

It was from this that Tony turned to Anna. Her eyes were steady and wide.

"About—about Lottie," he whispered; "you know that—that clinging kind? Well, she's clinging to Peepell now; but, back there, before she scared me into running away from her, she was trying to cling to me. You see,

I'd—I'd kissed her once—and her mother—she was my landlady, and she caught me at it—and made me say things—a few things, before I could think, you know, and—well, I wasn't used to women then: first thing I knew, if I hadn't enlisted, there'd have been a breach-of-promise suit on its merry way!"

For all his brave words, he was anxiously contrite; but Anna was smiling. It was a wistful smile, yet a courageous:

"Of course, I understand about Lottie, now! And I'm glad for you that you're not entangled—*Mr. Keppel.*"

"Keppel? Oh, forget it!"

She shook her head, the while she stroked Ellie's.

"Well, then," said Tony, "I *am* entangled; I'm entangled with you! You know that. What does it matter what my name is, or which of us the money belongs to, as long as we keep it in the family? Anna"—he took her hands, and his boyish face was flushed and eager—"will you do that: keep it there for us, together?"

Her smile changed suddenly to a soft little laugh with a sob in it—a sob of happiness and love.

"But you can't have me unless you take Ellie, too," she said.

And George Keppel kissed her on the mouth before them all—Haltspan, Davis and Lottie's husband—and then, tossing Ellie in his arms—Ellie, laughing as if she had for ages forgotten how to laugh—he kissed *her*, for good measure, as well.

"Listen," he cried, as he cuddled the child in his arms. "There's a whistle." He caught Anna's hand again. "It must be the up-train!"

THE END